Learner Choice and Accommodation: Exploring Comments in Chinese EFL Learning Diaries

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Abstract
Our paper identifies three senses of accommodation—cognitive, critical, and communicative—that we see as relevant to pedagogical and scholarly efforts to understand the learning and teaching of second/foreign languages in classroom settings, including constraints that learners encounter and choices that learners make. We focus on an interesting three-way contrast between discourses that represent accommodation as a difficult and challenging aspect of learning, as a facile and complicit acceptance of existing values and practices, or as an extension of communicative repertoire when dealing with different interlocutors and audiences. We go on to situate these reflections against a close exploration of comments by a group of language learners, in which we trace and analyse dominant themes and evoked experiences of learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a Chinese university. Data for the study comprise 275 entries drawn from a set of 65 EFL learning diaries. Focusing upon some of the main concerns and aspirations expressed in their writing, our commentary on selected entries identifies and discursively explores choices that these learners report themselves as making within their learning situation, and suggests the value of a multifaceted account of accommodation in language learning.

Key words: accommodation; learner choice; foreign language learning; diary studies

1. Introduction
In this paper, we trace a number of discourses—cognitive, critical, and communicative—that make significant use of the term accommodation in relation to contexts of learning.
Common to these accounts, we find the general notions that accommodation involves substantial changes in structures of belief, attitude or knowledge (compare Woods, 1996) or in patterns of behaviour, and that these changes occur in response to newly perceived contextual circumstances or phenomena that learners find themselves unable to ignore or to address sufficiently well by thinking, responding or acting as before. To anticipate, very broadly, cognitive accounts of accommodation represent the process as often effortful (not necessarily consciously) and leading to learning and growth. Critical versions of accommodation focus on institutionalized forces that exert pressure to conform, as well as interested forces that may encourage complicity in learning established ways of thinking, talking and acting. Social accounts of accommodation in communication theory emphasize extensions of repertoire and adaptation towards interlocutors and audiences. We argue that all three kinds of account are important for understanding language learning, and suggest that particular accounts may become more or less salient according to learning circumstances as well as research perspectives.

While part of our discussion is theoretical, the concerns underlying it are primarily pedagogic, and are focused upon understanding major constraints and opportunities that affect learner choice in language learning situations. We explore these concerns empirically by referring to discourse evidence from learner diaries about choices that learners in one situation make, and considering influences that help to shape these choices. We focus in particular on how far choices and changes that are consciously attempted appear to be easy or effortful, and complicit or committed, on the part of learners. Our ultimate aim in doing so is not to privilege any one discourse over another, but to suggest the value of a complex and multifaceted account of accommodation in scholarly approaches to language learning.

We begin by outlining two relevant strands in recent applied linguistics literature. Since 1990, this literature has devoted considerable theoretical attention to critical perspectives upon the teaching of second and foreign languages, including the teaching of English to speakers of other languages, and among other issues has suggested implications for learners’ choices and rights (e.g., Benesch, 1993; 1999; 2001; Benson, 2000; 2001; Canagarajah, 1993; 1999; Pennycook, 1994; 1997). This trend follows comparable discussions in first language teaching contexts (e.g., Chase, 1988), as Santos (1992) indicates. An early feature of this emerging critical tradition was the charge that the teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in particular was typically “accommodationist” (Benesch, 1993). That assumption itself evoked some critical questions (Allison, 1996), and later reformulations of comparable concerns have been more nuanced (e.g., Benesch, 2001; Cadman, 2002; see also Swales, 2004: 247). While maintaining its insistence on the central importance of political issues in language (and all) education, critical applied linguistics is by now committed also to reflexive approaches (Pennycook, 1999), and at times to undertaking investigative work in classroom contexts (Benesch, 2001).

A second feature of the recent literature involves wider investigative efforts to focus on learners and their voices (Bailey & Nunan, 1996; Benesch, 2001; Benson & Nunan, 2004; Nunan, 1988; Tarone & Yule, 1989; Tudor, 1996), sometimes specifically through studies of learning journals (e.g., Huang, 2005a; 2006; Bailey, 1991; Goh, 1997; Matsumoto, 1996). This work on learners has typically been empirical in method, and pedagogic in
nature and interest. Its attempts to analyse, understand and value learners’ articulated experiences are sometimes directly geared towards making teaching interventions more effective, for instance in the area of learner strategy development (Huang, 2005b; Cohen, 1998; Dickinson, 1992; Nunan, 1997; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 1991). However, the dangers of over-simple applications of academic research to practice are widely acknowledged. Increasingly, investigations are now likely to pursue better understanding of classroom learning and life as a significant goal in its own right (Allwright, 2003). Assuming such a goal, we see close attention to learners’ own articulated understandings as a form of applied-purpose ethnography that can throw its own light on issues that others are discussing within learning theory.

Our paper brings together these two forms of applied linguistic enquiry. On a theoretical level, we seek critically to reassess the place of accommodation in language learning, making reference to a number of distinct research traditions and discourses. Empirically, focusing on learners’ voices, we investigate comments written in learning diaries by students of English in a Chinese university, including entries that served to stimulate our rethinking of issues of accommodation and choice in language learning. Our approach towards learners’ comments is qualitative, within the limits of an exploratory study. It does not test hypotheses, but does commit us to serious engagement with data. Our closing discussion highlights some interesting findings and problems in our study and outlines research implications.

2. Theoretical background

Arguing that negative connotations of an “accommodationist ideology” (Benesch, 1993) tended to be taken for granted in earlier critical applied linguistic discussions, Allison (2003) has suggested that accommodation may merit “more reflective and multi-faceted scrutiny within EAP [English for Academic Purposes] circles” (p. 159). We would like to extend the scope of that call to cover all instructed second- and foreign-language learning. A reappraisal of accommodation in language learning involves reference to other disciplinary perspectives, specifically in learning theory and in communication theory, that we believe can be enlightening for an understanding of language learning and of language learners’ choices. In pursuing such a reappraisal, we have no wish to become apologists for any particular practices: we would call for openness, and continuing critical vigilance as well.

One relevant dimension to an account of accommodation in language learning is to be found in cognitive psychology. In Piagetian theory (e.g., Piaget, 1955; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969), assimilation and accommodation refer to contrasting responses to stimuli on the part of an individual learner. A learner either assimilates (fits in) new stimuli to existing mental schemata (conceptual frameworks and beliefs), or accommodates (adjusts/changes) mental schemata to take account of stimuli that cannot otherwise be both noticed and understood. Accommodation in this account is thus a crucial element in learning.

As Posner et al. (1982) point out (see also Pajares, 1992), any process of accommodation requires a much more radical alteration in existing belief structures than assimilation, as
accommodation involves reorganization and reassessment of earlier beliefs, sometimes including rejection of former beliefs, rather than simple addition of further beliefs or knowledge. Accommodation, therefore, is likely to give rise to resistance on the part of potential learners. Pajares (1992) summarises findings in Posner et al. (1982) to the effect that students:

…rejected new information, considered it irrelevant, compartmentalized their conceptions to prevent it from conflicting with existing beliefs, or even forcefully assimilated it in the face of conflicting logic, reason and observation before they would consider accommodation. (Pajares, 1992: 321)

In critical applied linguistics literature, in contrast (see opening references), the terms assimilation and accommodation (and cognate forms) are typically used in a very different fashion, in which these terms become complementary aspects of a single process. Reference to accommodation generally implies that learners are expected to fall more or less permanently into line with established ways of saying and doing things. Assimilation is typically linked (as in Cadman, 2002) to the same claim: an established system (e.g., English-medium university education) is taking in (assimilating) new students, and expecting them to accommodate, without itself undergoing significant change. In such accounts, accommodation is powerfully promoted, and is often difficult to resist. For example, Canagarajah (2001) presents accommodation to established modes of academic writing as a line of least resistance on the part of learners, implying that it is relatively easy to adjust one’s writing to conform with external expectations.

A unidirectional account of accommodation by learners to assimilating systems that do not themselves accommodate contrasts also with interesting possibilities offered in “communication accommodation theory” in social psychology (Giles et al., 1991; see also Thanasoulas, 1999). Within this theory, accommodative adjustment is something that participants in an exchange commonly undertake. Accommodation is certainly affected by status and power, but it is not confined to those with less status and power. Each interlocutor in a paired exchange is likely to adjust speech style in response to the other, often by bringing styles closer in order to assist communication. Teachers in classroom settings, on this view, could also be expected to accommodate their speech and treatment of subject matter in some respects to those of learners, as well as expecting learners to adjust to the curriculum and classroom situation. This is not to claim, incidentally, that all teachers actually make such adjustments, nor is it to suppose that any adjustments teachers may make are necessarily suited to needs and expectations of all learners and learner groups: these remain matters where critical vigilance and especially enquiry in particular settings are needed. Another relevant insight from communication accommodation theory is that accommodation in one exchange or one setting need not lead to permanent change or abandonment of communication practices in other contexts. Trying out new linguistic or curricular behaviour is not necessarily a threat to existing identities and other roles (though we know it can sometimes be so), and it can also extend social experience.

Drawing on these perspectives, we see strong possibilities for more cognitively and
socially oriented accounts of accommodation in learning theory (with the latter going beyond individual cognition, but without ignoring it) and in language curriculum evaluation. In this light, we see the attractions of the claim that accommodation appears:

…not as mandated conformity but as complex, adaptive behaviour, central to learning and communication, and calling for situated understanding of its realisations and reasons. (Allison, 2003: 159-160)

In broadly endorsing this view, however, we must not lose sight of “mandated conformity” as one possible and dangerous form of accommodation in many educational (and other) settings. It follows that organizational as well as individual behaviour continues to require scrutiny and study.

In the light of legitimate concerns over institutional pressures to conform, Benesch (2001) comments as follows on the possible role of a critical teacher of EAP:

Critical EAP teachers observe ways students exercise and resist power, help students translate their resistance into action, suggest ways to refine their actions, and record the activities and discussions in their work as teacher/researchers. They do all this mindful of the relationship between flexibility and inflexibility in the institutions where they work. (pp. 60-61)

This account interestingly shows teachers and students turning responses into choices and considered action in an institutional setting. As Benesch (2001) earlier puts it:

The goal is not to make them [EAP students] into well-behaved students happily fulfilling demands but, instead, to view them as members of a community who are aware of various possibilities and who decide which ones to carry out. (p. 53)

We welcome this emphasis on encouraging awareness and on learners making their own informed choices. We would also like, however, to suggest that accommodation, as well as resistance, may properly contribute to choice, action, and learning. Once again, we find that accommodation (“happily fulfilling demands”) is portrayed in passing in the critical applied linguistics literature as necessarily unthinking conformist behaviour that does not entail effort and choice. We are particularly interested in contrasts that we see between critical accounts of accommodation as the easy way ahead, cognitive accounts of accommodation as a demanding last resort when learners find themselves unable to proceed as before, and social accounts of accommodation as a contextualised extension of communicative options.

In our own teaching experience (and despite Canagarajah, 2001), students typically do not pick up established community discourse practices either easily or unquestioningly. Nor would we want them to do the latter. When considering the possible senses and roles of accommodation in learning, we would like to include conceptual space for teaching initiatives and learner insights that invite students to call into question some of their own discourse habits and practices, and to explore some of the alternatives that are offered
in the discourse habits and practices of academic and teaching communities, as well as providing space for questioning these alternative discourse habits. We also recognize that students might see value in some of the discourse alternatives they encounter, and might choose to try out new (to them) ways of writing, without thereby being silenced or assimilated. Students’ awareness of possibilities (to echo Benesch) is not static, and their decisions about which possibilities to carry out can include space for experimentation and change. Accommodation to some possibilities, and resistance to others, may even work together in the dynamics of learner choice.

As we focus for illustrative and investigative purposes upon students of English in a university setting in China, we must not presuppose that these students are being introduced to the discourse practices of established, disciplinary academic communities in line with expectations in the EAP literature. In many circumstances, this may not yet be the case, and it is always highly pertinent to investigate the nature of the actual “curriculum genres” (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Christie, 1989; Johns, 1997) that students experience. We need to ask what new information and pressures learners encounter as we seek to criticize and evaluate pedagogy, either globally or in a given situation. A prominent feature of the data that we shall present is that the Chinese university students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in our study are often explicitly focused upon aspects of their own accommodation, and sometimes resistance, towards the test-like constraints that govern many of the curriculum genres, classroom tasks, textbooks, topics and expected forms of behaviour that constitute their classroom community. These appear to bear little relation to the reading and writing practices of professional academics.

Our focus now is upon some of the choices that language learners in EFL classes in a Chinese university are conscious of making, and some of the accommodative pressures—cognitive, socially communicative, or institutionalized—that may influence these choices. Our challenge will be to infer some of these choices and pressures through discourse traces that they leave in students’ comments about language learning experiences. This raises issues of principle and method that we take up in the next section.

3. The study: Situation, data and method

The learner diary data that we re-examine in this study were obtained in the course of an investigation into EFL learning in a Chinese university. In this section, we outline the original situation and diary dataset, and the focus and method of our enquiry. We present and discuss findings in a subsequent section.

3.1 Situation and data

The second-named author developed a longitudinal action research project initially in the context of a one-semester/18-week EFL reading course that he was teaching to second-year English majors across three classes (38 students each) in a four year BA TEFL degree programme in a local Chinese teachers’ university in the year 2000/2001 (Given space constraints, subsequent stages of the longitudinal project are not reported here but are
available in Huang, 2005b). His focus was on metacognition training (MT), which was incorporated into the regular reading course to enhance metacognitive awareness in EFL reading and to promote learner autonomy in general EFL learning. As part of the EFL reading course requirement, students were asked to write reading reports (summary and critique of what they had read) and to keep a learning journal, recording their conceptualization of EFL reading processes and their reflections on other aspects of EFL learning (e.g., listening, speaking, writing, grammar and vocabulary learning). To collect classroom data for evaluating the integrated MT programme and the whole reading course, the second-named author employed a range of investigative instruments and methods such as learner diaries, an end-of-course questionnaire, participant observation and informal interviews, but learner diaries constituted a major tool for data collection and generated the most useful insights into learning and teaching (see Huang, 2005a). Respondents granted permission for the anonymous use of their comments in published research reports. For our current purposes we returned to the initial diary dataset gathered in the second-year EFL reading course, comprising 275 entries by 65 diarists across three second-year classes in the year 2000/2001. It should be noted that although a substantial part of the diary entries are concerned with EFL reading processes and the reading course, the diarists also wrote about learning activities and teaching behaviour in other courses which they were taking concurrently with the reading course.

3.2 Method
A challenge for this study was how to best engage with the diary data at our disposal and do justice to it while also presenting it concisely and perspicuously for our discussion. The data had originally been collected and analyzed for other purposes (Huang, 2005a). For this study, we lacked any further opportunities for follow-up interviews or onsite observation, and were thus confined to the texts. We eventually decided to read through all the student diary entries, and the previous content analysis, giving particular attention to explicit indications of:
- Learner choice;
- Changes in learning behaviours or declared beliefs;
- Evaluation (positive and negative).

We would also look for implicit indications of these elements, but only with great caution. Proceeding in this way, we soon found that students “accommodate” extensively in the course of teaching and learning activities, but that we needed to identify what they accommodated to, in what senses, for what purposes, in what contexts, and involving what value judgements, as well as what they avoid as they accommodate.

The outcome of our revisitation of the diary data is here reported as an informal content analysis that can serve purposes of expository convenience. Its categories are hybrid in nature. They are neither exclusively a priori (from our theoretical concerns) nor fully grounded in data (since our approach is selective). Rather, they arise from the interaction of our present interests and themes in the data. Some categories do mainly reflect key emphases in the diary entries: for example, our only reason for separating categories 1 and 2 is to reflect distinct emphases in students’ comments on language
tests. Our categories are not intended to be mutually exclusive, so some examples may overlap and some themes will recur (from somewhat different angles). We acknowledge that this organization of our material is simply one expository possibility among others, but believe it will serve our ends here.

We eventually agreed to use five categories to present students’ comments on their learning that related to issues of learner choice and forms of accommodation within language learning situations:

1) Accommodation to test-like aspects;
2) Accommodation to other materials and tasks;
3) Reluctance to accommodate to aspects of the course;
4) Efforts to change own habits or inclinations;
5) Responses that blend accommodation and reluctance to change.

Our presentation now pursues the relationship between accommodation and considered choice. All citations are verbatim (unedited), sometimes with omissions (dotted lines), and occasionally with our suggestion of what word form may have been intended by the diarists (square brackets).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Accommodation to test-like aspects
The diary data illustrate that students were eager to find methods that best fitted themselves in an examination-oriented context. They frequently reported their struggles to decide whether to read the questions of a passage first or to read the passage first, in terms of “effective reading” (more correct answers within shorter time). Their major concerns in completing comprehension exercises were success rate and reading speed, to which they had clearly accommodated. Extracts 1 and 2 demonstrate these points.

Extract 1
During the extensive reading course, the teacher asked us to do Section A to check our ability of scanning. Firstly, I just looked at half of the questions and the other half I will read later. Because although I read all of the questions, I can’t remember them when I read the text. Secondly, I concentrated my mind to the text to find the answers to the questions. I know that the shortcoming of my reading skill is to read too fast without understand the text well. I want to control my reading speed. But I was easily affected by the students beside me. I felt that they did it very quickly. So I was a bit nervous and I accelerated my speed to choose the answer without second thought. Finally, when I finished, I found there were still much left, according to the teacher’s limited time. But I still failed this time, some of chooses were wrong. I asked my classmate for advice. She said although the reading speed is slow, she can answer the questions correctly. She said she was very worried about whether the answer is correct or not. So I must pay attention to the answers, but not just purchased [pursued] the reading speed.

This student consciously monitors her or his own approach to the task, performance, and those of other students in order to make judgements about what reading and answering
behaviour will be most effective. The goals being pursued are set by the teaching programme, materials, and tasks, and relate to future examination tasks, and the student seeks to accommodate to them, not least in the light of the perceived success of other classmates. There is evidence of uncertainty, anxiety and difficulty in doing so (clearly not an instance of “happily fulfilling demands”). Similar considerations arise for other students.

Extract 2
When you are reading, you can use the reading skill you like. Among the reading skills, scanning is a way that you look for the exact answer to a specific question. You don’t need to read the text (article) sentence by sentence. But many people come across a problem: to read the question first or read the text first. I prefer to read the question first. Do like this, you can know what you should pay more attention to. If you forget the question when reading, you can return to the question again. But different people have different opinion. It depends on your preference and certain situation.

Almost all students tended to accommodate to test-like constraints to varying degrees. For many (like the two diarists above), accommodation was often a product of a considered choice. The data also show that students’ ideas for making changes or choices were grounded in various sources. Some might be drawn from their teachers, some might arise from students’ own experience, and some were explicitly attributed to what classmates had said (as in Extract 1). The writer of Extract 2 shows awareness of both person and situation differences that may affect choices. (It is not clear from this brief extract how far this writer’s choices also involve change.)

4.2 Accommodation to other materials and tasks
Students’ difficulties in deciding whether to read the questions of a passage first or to read the passage first, and their concerns about improving reading speed, either assumed less importance or did not apply in normal “out of class” reading, e.g., newspapers, magazines and novels (usually without accompanying questions). In choosing and reading out-of-class materials, students seemed instead to accommodate gradually to new perceptions of need that are constructed in various learning contexts, as in Extracts 3 and 4.

Extract 3
A note from 21st Century Newspaper gave me a deep impression. It said if you want to remember the words, you could not separate them, you must put them into sentences or texts. I have the same experience. At the beginning, if I meet a new word when I read novels or texts, I want to know the word’s meaning immediately. I look it up at once. But I just know the word’s meaning at that moment, I can’t remember it a few days later, and I must look it up again. Now I know the reason. Because I just know the meaning but not use it. I did not connect it with a sentence or put it into the text. Today if I meet a new word in novels or in newspapers. I will write it down in my notebook, not just a single word, but a sentence or a word group. After some time, I find it is a good way to increase my vocabulary. I will continue to do that.
The learner cites both advice and personal experience as influences upon a change in approach towards word learning.

The next extract shows a student writer choosing (or recognizing a compulsion?) to move away from fast extensive reading (associated with the course goals) into close and sustained novel reading. This could also imply an element of resistance within generally accommodative behaviour. The level of deliberation also suggests the beginnings of learner autonomy—taking control of one’s own learning (Benson, 2001).

Extract 4
To improve my reading skills, I usually read some books in simple English. Today I come across an English novel named “King Solomon’s Mines”, which is written by H. Rider Haggard. The story is so interesting that all my attention is attracted. For four hours, my eyes can not leave the book for ever one second. I put all my heart and soul in the story. Every time when I come to a splendid paragraph, my heart stretched tightly. There are some paragraphs which are too touching, too interesting, I can’t help reading over and over again, sentence by sentence, word by word. Carefully reading [close reading] is also very good sometimes I think. I can learn new words and analyze the sentence structures.

4.3 Reluctance to accommodate to aspects of the course
Various comments in the diary data indicate fairly widespread resistance to boring teaching/learning materials and tasks in various courses that students were taking (note that students’ comments were not confined to reading and the reading course), also extending to lack of teacher explanations and follow-up (Extract 5), and absence of evident improvement despite teachers’ assurances (Extract 6). However, such responses may covertly convey suggestions intended for teachers in the TEFL programme, and so may not entail resistance to any particular course. Although the materials and tasks reported in Extracts 5 and 6 were not used in the reading course, the students might take the chance of diary writing to voice their concerns to their reading teacher (the second-named author) who might pass their words around. Besides comments that imply a desire for changes in activities or teaching behaviour, there are also occasional indications of a more general and shared reluctance to study (compare section 4.4).

Extract 5
I don’t think it’s useful to make us do some [examination] papers without explaining some difficult points of the papers. I didn’t say all the exercises should be explained one by one, all I said was it’s necessary to explain the difficult ones. As I know, just a few students will finish the exercises teachers give us after class. Maybe we are not active and diligent, or we don’t take them seriously because they needn’t be handed in…

Extract 6
After I did some listening exercises, I often thought, did it really work? Teacher [not the reading teacher/the second-named author] said if we insist on it for half an hour a day, we would make progress. But I had done it for a long time, and I do not think I have made some progress.
The writer of Extract 5 may or may not be among the few students finishing the exercises in question; the writer of Extract 6 has clearly devoted time and effort to the listening exercises, but to little apparent avail. Our text data alone cannot really show, however, whether these learners have questioned their own learning behaviour sufficiently to make efforts to work in different ways from before.

### 4.4 Efforts to change own habits or inclinations

A separate category for efforts is included to reflect marked learner emphasis on this theme, tending to counter any idea that accommodating to expectations might be an easy path. Indications of students’ negative appraisal of their own (or classmates’) study habits and attitudes are quite common in the data. Such responses are interesting and not easy to interpret. Some comments appear to be a spur towards accommodative change, intended for example to focus more effectively on examination preparation, or in contrasting cases to go beyond a narrow examination focus. Some entries ostensibly acknowledge laziness, appear perplexed by it (Extract 7), express shame, or exhort oneself to change (Extract 8 is one example of exhortation). There are elements of self-recrimination (and sometimes other-recrimination), but no comments were directed overtly against the learning of English as such.

**Extract 7**

Learning the language of another nation, it seems like open a skylight, we can see another brilliant world. It is in itself a delight or joy. Why are we vexed to study?

Comments including exhortation usually appear at the end of an entry to express determination, possibly as a self-motivating strategy, as in Extract 8:

**Extract 8 (exhortation after three short paragraphs)**

…I am trying to transform the ideas of what I read. I know I should read more and think more.

The next extract shows a clear attitudinal change over time towards reading simple English, in the light of reflection upon experience.

**Extract 9**

To read simple English materials is a good way to improve not only reading skills but also writing skills. After reading simple English for a period of time, I have that conclusion. Months ago I thought simple English is useless. Because we know every word, it is a waste of time to read materials in simple English. But I change my opinion gradually. Because I find that I am not boring [bored] while reading simple English and I can learn to express clearly with simple English words. It’s interesting and useful. We can’t ignore the effect of simple English materials.

A number of diary entries, including some extracts above, have suggested an element of selectivity in learner accommodation. Learners appear to consult their own experiences in deciding what works for them, what they do or don’t enjoy and what they value. Section 5 pursues this theme further.
4.5 Blending of accommodation and reluctance to change
This section explores the interplay of accommodation and resistance (or reluctance) to change in four areas of learning: (1) recitation, (2) reading the vocabulary book and learning from it, (3) reading boring materials or textbooks, and (4) keeping reading reports.

(1) Recitation
Reciting words and whole texts can serve various purposes in Chinese classrooms, which can include attention to understanding and meaning (Marton, Dall’Alba & Tse, 1996). In our data, it gives rise to a range of responses. Comments in Extract 10 single out both boring texts (materials: see area 3 below) and doubts about whether the recitation leads to spoken fluency (task) as concerns for this learner.

Extract 10
Today X [a teacher] asked us to read a text. She said she would ask us to recite it again. When I heard this I felt very upset because of my bad memory.
I didn’t like to recite texts when I was a little girl. I thought those texts were so boring. So I often borrowed some interesting books from the library or my classmates. But my teachers often forced us to remember the whole texts. I often was afraid of that.
Now X asks us to recite the text; it makes me think of the days. I am not object to the way of reciting the text, but I think, although we can recite all the text, we can’t not use them fluently.

Ostensibly, the student does not object to the activity as such; however, she also reports her younger self as being prompted to borrow and read interesting books, apparently in reaction against the texts chosen for recitation, and as being afraid of having to remember the whole text when reading.

Some other instances in our data appear to be cases where students largely overcome initial reluctance and accommodate to recitation, perhaps becoming convinced of its value or learning to pay more attention to meaning in the course of the task. (Instances are not reproduced here, but comparable reactions are illustrated below for reading reports)

(2) Reading the vocabulary book and learning from it
Dissatisfaction with the learning of words in isolation is another common theme in our data (already seen above). In some cases, reluctance to work with the vocabulary book is associated with other positive learning choices, as in Extract 11.

Extract 11
I don’t like to read the book Vocabulary for Band-4 [an influential national test for English majors] because I don’t like to memorize words like this, just looking at the words and then explanations. If I do like this, the words will be kept on my mind just for several hours and then gone. As though I can remember its meaning. I can’t use it. I don’t know why everybody like to read the book. I wonder how they can memorize words for long. I have my own way. I like to read English newspapers and novels, as coming across the new words many times, I can memorize them automatic. I don’t know whether these words are useful in Band-4 or not. I think they are useful in our daily life.
The writers of extracts 10 and 11 appear to be consciously (or retrospectively) taking stock of perceived situational learning opportunities, and making learning choices that suit them, as opposed to opting out of learning.

(3) **Reading boring materials or textbooks**

Resistance to reading textbooks can be associated with a decision to do something else, and with continuing accommodation towards the notion of practice.

**Extract 12**

For several days I don’t want to [read] any materials in our textbook, no matter on politics, economic, military or entertainment. Because I get very upset when face these reading materials. I’m very worried of it. But I can’t put these things in my mind even when I force myself to read these material. So I decide to do something else for fun.

I turn on my computer to play game. I have newly installed a game. It is an English edition. I open the game, and there are many English informations about the game, the mission. To find out how to play the game very well and make clear my mission, I have to read the words and try to understand the meaning. I meet some new words. I look for my dictionary. When I get my dictionary, I notice that I’m doing some reading. I smile, the textbook is not the only material I can read. I can practise anywhere there are words.

In other cases, students make alternative reading choices, such as novels or magazines. Resistance to textbook materials is associated with accommodative acceptance of other purposeful reading, and at times with requests to the teacher for reading guidance, rather than marking any general rejection of reading activities in English. Occasionally, a student’s alternative reading choices are not linked to learning purposes: one entry concludes “so I have to give up and just read a novel to kill this Sunday”. Unlike this instance, however, most references to novel-reading in our data are clearly to novels in English, and are asserted to be of value.

(4) **Keeping reading reports**

From the data, the keeping of reading reports is an instance where an initial obligation arising from teacher demands is often accepted in time as something of value. Most comments on this area of learning thus lend themselves to an account in which initial difficulty or resistance is overcome and accommodation prevails (see Extracts 13-15). Even here, though, accommodation can be interestingly selective: the writer of Extract 13 recognizes the value of the reading report task, but also finds a way to reduce its demands.

**Extract 13**

First, thank you for my teacher. Because he give me assignment of reading report. It forced me to read novels. At first, I read the original English novel, but there were too many new words to make me difficult to understand. So the next time, I borrowed the novel that has Chinese translation. It’s easier for me to understand… Now, I’ve finished one. I am becoming
interested in reading them. Thank you, my teacher.
So now I write reading report. But it’s not for the assignment, it’s for reading well.
I’ll do me best and try to read more. I hope it can improve my reading and enlarge my vocabulary.

The expressions of thanks to the teacher might seem overly fulsome in other cultural contexts, and must raise some questions about the writer’s intentions. Nevertheless, the message that an initial sense of compulsion was replaced by actual interest and enjoyment is not isolated in the data (Extracts 14 and 15 are examples among others), and should not be too easily dismissed. We also note the social aspect in the two extracts that follow, with uses of “we” and “our” that make claims to be speaking for classmates as well.

Extract 14
…as time goes by, reading will become our habit, We won’t feel to be forced by more.

Extract 15
A semester is being over. I feel content with the word [work] I have done. I feel a little surprised that I have written about nine pieces of reading report, nearly one piece per week, much more than I had expected.
At the beginning, when we were told to write reading report, we all thought it was rather difficult to keep on writing. It seemed that we didn’t have so much time spending on writing essays. We all wanted to have more spare time. So we were passive to accept this assignment.
But now, I see the effect of doing so. Under the assignment “pressure”, I had planned to read as much as I can, if not for writing, I would not have read so many books. The more I read, the more I know about those famous novels, and the better I understand the literature meaning…
So, I think, to write reading report is a good way to improve our thinking and writing, and knowledge, too.

In these and similar cases, it seems that students were realizing gradually that involvement in reading-report keeping could open up various opportunities for learning. Accommodation often implied a certain degree of initial difficulty and reluctance and occurred through some effort after those reactions had been overcome. Although it is possible that respondents are partly acting out a role as good students in making such declarations, it is also noteworthy that keeping reading reports does not appear to have given rise to the sort of continuing ambivalence that we saw in comments on recitation or on keeping vocabulary books.

5. Conclusion

Our exploration of learner diary data has given some substance to our initial thoughts about different forms of accommodation as forces that are at work in learner choices.
Some instances appear to have involved effort and persistence, sometimes in the face of learners’ own doubts about the value of a new activity or approach, and to have led to new insights, or at least to professions of such. Some appear, unsurprisingly enough, to have been specific to particular tasks, or indeed test requirements, without necessarily marking any more fundamental shifts in interests or learning preferences.

It is clear that different learners and learning activities gave rise to different affordances (perceptions of possibility or difficulty for courses of action) and that learners were often conscious agents in their own learning. There are also many indications of interaction between cognitive aspects of a situation (e.g., ease or difficulty of memorization under particular conditions) and social aspects (e.g., what classmates say or how well they appear to do). We hope our necessarily brief discussion of selected extracts will also have evoked the need for critical perspectives on the data, for example to consider ways in which student respondents may hope to influence, or to be perceived by, an ex-teacher as researcher and as colleague of current teachers.

In closing, we outline a few questions about learners’ choices that may suggest the complexity of the field. What prompts classroom language learners either to persist in or to change their behaviour or their beliefs? When consciously choosing to accommodate in some manner, what advice or what examples do learners follow, and what other advice or examples do they set aside? When and why does this happen? How do learners reinterpret advice, and review their own choices, in the light of continuing experience, and perhaps also reconstruct that experience? How do answers to these, and many other related questions, vary in terms of particular materials, activities, tasks, and roles, and across larger educational, social, cultural and political contexts for language learning? How are accommodative learner choices best understood and valued, in terms of cognitive growth, social communicative adjustment, or conformity to institutional pressures, with or without intellectual understanding and acceptance?

We would not expect single or simple answers to these essentially investigative questions. We have sought to develop and illustrate the view that accommodation is not an easy process, and that some forms of accommodation may properly contribute to choice, action and learning. We would like to close our discussion by emphasizing, evidently but also importantly, that accommodation is neither necessarily good or necessarily bad, as it must depend on what is being accommodated to, by whom, and why. We remain deeply interested in an overall picture in which various forms and forces of accommodation play a role as language learners make choices, and as language learning develops.

References


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