How to Adopt Learner-centred Approach in Chinese EFL Context

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Abstract

This paper introduces the contextual factors of English lessons in Chinese universities and discusses the three attributes of the learner-centred approach, namely, satisfying the individual learners' needs, transmitting learning strategies, and developing the sense of responsibility in learning. Suggestions are provided in terms of the application of the learner-centred approach in Chinese context.

Introduction

Many colleges and universities in China share similar institutional, societal and individual characteristics related to English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This includes Hebei Polytechnic University where the author is working. At this university, EFL is a two-year compulsory programme for non-English major students, who take the regular course (text-based intensive reading) 4 hours a week over 18 weeks of a semester. The class size is determined by the institution, which are usually 50 to 60 students. This is regarded as such a large class, according to Logastro (2001) that it makes a big challenge for EFL teaching. Plus, the EFL learners are from different areas of China with different educational backgrounds particularly EFL education and have a wide range of the language competence (Guo & Li, 2005). Differences of learners' language proficiency and competence constitute a multilevel class (Hess, 2001). In the meantime, the university tends to support language teaching by equipping EFL classrooms with computer software and hardware to achieve the goal of multimedia teaching. Despite only one computer in the classrooms, this has demonstrated a salient advantage over many other programmes.

Due to the unprecedented economic and technological developments in China as well as people's growing awareness of internationalisation and globalisation, EFL learners and teachers are developing dynamic characteristics related to learners' motivations and teachers' reflection on their teaching approaches. Firstly, the cohort of EFL learners begins to become one of the most active factors in EFL programmes. Their motivation on EFL learning is ever changing. The change firstly occurs at the moment of enrolment in a higher educational institution. In middle schools, they are motivated by examinations (Chan, 2001) while in university they may be externally motivated when seeing the fact that many entrepreneurs and companies provide priority and access to those graduates with a good command of English (Wu, 2001). In addition to external motivators, with physical and cognitive development they may be intrinsically motivated because they may want to develop appropriate language skills locally and internationally (Singh, Kell & Pandian, 2002; Wu, 2001). Nevertheless, a certain number of EFL learners show little interest in learning the foreign language for various reasons. These dynamic and diverse learners' needs make EFL education complicated and challenging but are 'must' considerations for educators.

Secondly, these learners' factors result in teachers' reconsiderations, retrospections and reflections on EFL teaching including pedagogy, methodology and instructional strategies. In addition, EFL teachers' enthusiasm in adopting suitable and applicable approaches partially comes from the College English Curriculum Requirements proposed by the Chinese Ministry of Education (2004). The Requirements emphasize the importance of providing for individual learning styles and adopting effective pedagogy in EFL education to improve the learners' communication skills. The teachers have a strong feeling that neither teacher-centred grammar-translation method nor reading for comprehension-based approach can meet the demands of large class education (Guo & Li, 2005) as it fails to keep learners motivated because the two approaches ignore learners' needs—to communicate or to pass examina-

examinations. All these contribute to the author considering the adoption of learner-centred approach to teaching in the micro social context.

The learner-centred approach

As the concept of learner-centredness has emerged, it has been used to refer to such notions as active learning, self-directed learning and autonomous learning. The learner-centred approach to EFL teaching attempts to satisfy the learners' needs (Pillay, 2002) by providing learners with efficient learning strategies (Nunan, 2002) and develops in them a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning (Hedge, 2000) and managing all related processes (Pulist, 2000). From this understanding, three major attributes of the learner-centred approach to EFL teaching may be identified, namely, meeting the various needs of learners, transmitting learning strategies and cultivating the sense of responsibility in learning. The three attributes of this teaching approach are supposed to be well accommodated in the author's micro social context for the following reasons.

The first attribute—to satisfy the individual learners' needs is a fundamental requirement to achieve effective teaching in large multilevel classes. One of the distinct features in the author's micro social context is multilevel because of the learners' different language acquisition ability, motivation, intelligence, self-discipline, literacy, attitude and interest (Hess, 2001). The traditional teacher-centred approaches and methods like grammar-translation in the multilevel classes can not promote optimal learning because they largely ignore individual differences and the contribution of the learners in the learning process (Jacobs & Hall, 2002). By contrast, learner-centred teaching is a perspective that couples a focus on EFL learners' experiences, background, talents, interests, capabilities and needs (Pulist, 2000). This approach attempts to promote learner motivation to the greatest extent. In practice, appropriate application of the approach is gaining increasing popularity among the EFL learners in Hebei Polytechnic University as it can not only help those who want to pass the examinations like the nationwide College English Test (CET) but also those who are eager to use the language for various present and future needs.

Another attribute of the learner-centred approach—transmitting learning strategies, is an urgent need of young adults, the major cohort of EFL learners. In middle schools learners are trained how to gain high academic achievement rather than how to learn the foreign language, therefore, a large number of the learners do not know how to learn English efficiently despite many years of study (Nunan, 2002). Given these circumstances EFL teachers should take responsibility for teaching learners how to learn efficiently and effectively by giving support to more effective learning strategies. The application of learner-centred approach in the English classrooms entitles teachers to introduce suitable strategies to meet the urgent needs of learners. In doing so, EFL learners may benefit a lot because their interest and motivation may be greatly aroused. For instance, by introducing contextualized strategy of vocabulary acquisition into classroom activities, learners may abandon their previous learning strategies like rote memorization as they can find this contextualized method more efficient.

The last attribute of the learner-centred approach, developing the sense of responsibility in learning, is an effective means of equalizing EFL learners and teachers in EFL education. This helps establish a safe welcoming teacher-student relationship in the micro social context. EFL learners are adults already (18 years plus) and come to class with their own thinking and world outlook. To allow them to take the responsibility in learning is to respect them as equals in the social relationship. A strong sense of responsibility in learning means active involvement. In a Chinese traditional teacher-centred environment (mainly in middle schools and in some EFL teaching in colleges and universities), learners usually regard the teacher in the classroom as the only expert resource (Chan, 2001) and they are too much teacher dependent. To a considerable extent this impairs the learners' self-esteem and motivation to learning because learning is an interactive process and too much dependence on teachers may reduce the interaction and engagement with the language. By contrast, learner-centred approach advocates an active engagement in EFL learning and requires EFL learners to take on the responsibility for language learning (Hedge, 2000). Once an adult learner has developed a responsibility for learning, s/he will take an active involvement in classroom activities, and this will undoubtedly achieve considerable outcomes in language learning and contributes to a pleasant environment.

Given that the three major attributes of the learner-centred approach are well accommodated in the micro social context in terms of individual learner needs, learning strategies and learning responsibility

and environment in the classroom, the author strongly recommends the appropriate adoption of learner-centred approach in the context.

Suggestions for learner-centred teaching

The learner-centred approach in China is still in its infancy and it is early to predict that it will be widely adopted as an effective and efficient teaching approach in EFL education. Nevertheless, the author would like to share her ideas on how to implement the approach in EFL teaching, expecting they shed light on the nationwide College English teaching reform since 2004.

Firstly, it is important for EFL teachers to foster confidence in adopting learner-centred approach in a large multilevel class. On one hand, although teaching in large classes is far from easy, there are certain advantages that EFL teachers should be aware of. One advantage is that teachers never need worry about the lack of human resources to interact in class. Krashen and Long & Porters (as cited in Locastra, 2001) all address the importance of learners' interacting with the language since meaningful interaction prompts language proficiency. There are more than enough human resources to give energy to carry out interaction and engagement in class. In addition, in large classes, the instructor has a built-in advantage. Since different levels in language ability, it is only natural that the more able students assume consciously and unconsciously the role of teacher assistants (Hess, 2001). They take on the responsibility to help those less able students in learning the subject. As a matter of fact, the learners in one group may help one another due to complementary factors in interest, way of thinking, competency and so on, and therefore the teacher is not the only pedagogue. To know well these benefits that a large class brings to class helps cultivate confidence in EFL teachers to adopt learner-centred approach in the context. On the other, teachers should not only focus on the number of separate individuals but also on the classroom culture as a whole. The metaphor—the classroom as coral gardens (Breen, 2001) sheds light on the learner-centred adoption in large classes. According to Breen (2001), culture of the class is collective, highly normative and jointly constructed. That means every classroom has their own common culture shared by the whole cohort of EFL learners. This theoretically explains why proper teaching approaches and classroom activities can cater for the whole culture of the class rather than just meeting the needs of a small number of individual students.

Secondly, it is important to organize various text-based activities in the large multilevel classrooms. Text-based classroom activities are emphasized because various needs of EFL learners may be catered to. For example, those less able EFL learners may need to prepare before classes to have a better understanding of the teacher's instruction in class while more able students may be encouraged to take part in in-depth thinking. Variety is important in all teaching but it is particularly relevant to large multilevel classes because varieties of tasks and activities can accommodate different levels in class (Hess, 2001). The activities may be various in ways, forms or difficulties. For example, the activities can be silent thinking, pair work, group discussion, role play, or project. To put simply, EFL teachers need to use all sorts of mediations to motivate individual learners, create opportunities for learners to appropriate the language and help them make progress. In addition, Lantolf (2000) states that activities are differentiated from each other by their objects and motives and not necessarily by their concrete realization as actions. Hence, the same activity can be realized through different actions and with different forms of mediation. It is this differentiation that theoretically makes the learning at the learners' own pace. Here is an example. In a paired paragraph imitation, student A is very quick and Student B seems to have trouble in doing the work. Student A can use his or her English to explain to Student B how to do it. The result is that Student A can get the task done with the help of Student B and Student A appropriates the language. From this, it may be safely concluded that despite students' different capacity, individual needs may be catered to and individual progress may be achieved.

Thirdly, collaboration is a must in large classes. Collaboration means working together and cooperating. Through collaborative learning, students benefit self-esteem, participate more, they learn how to compromise, they negotiate meaning (Jacobs & Hall, 2002), and they make errors and correct themselves. In large classes, the teacher cannot be everywhere at the same time and cannot service the immediate needs of all students. Students therefore turn to other pedagogues like those more able in English learning. According to the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Lantolf, 2000) originally prosed by Vygotsky, learners often achieve more success with support from someone else, compared to when they act alone. Van Lier (as cited in Lantolf, 2000) considers the ZPD as an especially promising way of organizing teaching/learning activities in the classroom. In collaborative activities everyone needs get engaged and take on the slice of responsibility and make their own contributions. The pre-

previous example also illustrates this point.

Last but not least, EFL teachers need to carefully observe the classroom culture and adjust to their own methodologies and employ techniques to cater for specific needs of students. For example, one technique is questioning downwards (Mangubhai, 2005). This is a technique that can be best used in intensive reading classes. It is a way of helping students to reach the textual meaning by establishing what students might already know about the topic. The idea of 'downward' is a metaphor of trying to establish what students know and then building their comprehension of the text from that starting point. In educational terms, it is constructivism, which fully considers the prior knowledge and experiences of the learners. For example, when discussing 'American culture', the teacher asked 'What is culture?' Few responded. Then, realizing the question was a bit 'upward', the teacher decided to shift the questions onto the learners' home culture first, and asked 'What do you think Chinese culture?' The Chinese students exploded and began to express their interesting understandings as if they were experts in Chinese culture study. After the 'warm-up' which postulated their familiar topic, they came to discuss the American culture and various ideas popped up. The technique worked. Also, integrating technology in the classroom is another effective technique as it can cater for students' different learning needs. In fact, there are many creative techniques that can be used in the classrooms, therefore, the adoption of effective techniques definitely play an important role in improving the classroom climate and in achieving learner-centeredness.

Conclusion

This paper firstly introduces the context in which learner-centred approach is adopted. In this part, the characteristics of EFL learners and teachers are discussed, which are important factors to affect choosing teaching approaches. The follow-up focuses on the understanding of learner-centred approach, identifies three major attributes of this approach and explains why they accommodate Chinese context. Finally, suggestions on how to adopt learner-centred approach are provided in order to help achieve effective teaching. Although it is too early to predict its promising future of the approach in Chinese environment, employing the leaner-centred approach may provide some ways to help solve some problematic issues in EFL teaching.

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