Research on How English Teachers Meet the Challenge of Creating a Learner-centred, Communicative, Intercultural Classroom to Achieve Optimal Student Learning Outcomes

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Abstract: This essay explores the challenge faced by English teachers in creating a learner-cantered and intercultural language classroom. The key areas include autonomous learning, communicative language teaching (CLT), and intercultural language learning. The paper emphasizes the multifaceted nature of learners' autonomy, the shift to CLT for a more learner-centered approach, and the integration of cultural elements for intercultural competence. Educational implications highlight the role of motivation, meaningful classroom tasks, and the use of online resources. The conclusion emphasizes the shift to intercultural communicative competence and the teacher's role in preparing students for global challenges.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy; Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Intercultural Competence

1. Introduction

Being a language teacher is more than simply delivering content from textbook, teaching grammar and vocabulary or assigning homework. Given the impact teachers can make on the lives of our learners, it is critical for us to continually reflect on our teaching and develop knowledge and skills to achieve effective classroom practice and optimal learning outcomes.

Global interest in developing learners' autonomy, communicative and intercultural competence in language learning has grown considerably in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) since the past decades. Therefore, this essay aims to explore how English teachers can create a learner-centred, communicative and intercultural language classroom, including three literature reviews on the topic of autonomous learning, communicative and intercultural language learning as well as their educational implications for future teaching.

2. Autonomous Learning

Holec (1981) has contributed to a seminal and influential definition of autonomous learning as the learner's capacity to take control of one's own study, regarding the ability of planing, selecting learning materials and methods, monitoring and evaluating the progress in the process of language learning. In addition to learners' ability to take responsibility for their learning, Littlewood (1996) highlights another aspect of autonomous learning, that is, learner's independence in making decisions. Littlewood (1999) argues that a learner's capacity for decision-making is relative to the degree and thus distinguishes two types of learner autonomy: proactive autonomy and reactive autonomy. In the level of proactive autonomy, learners claim partial or entire ownership of setting up directions in their own learning, in terms of deciding upon learning aims, methods, materials and so forth; on the other hand, learners do not determine their own direction in the level of reactive autonomy, but they are able to coordinate their resources independently to achieve their objectives once a direction is initiated (Littlewood, 1999).

A significant psychological aspect is added to the definition of autonomous learning by Little (1991), who emphasises the cognitive processes for managing one's own learning and argues that one's capacity for autonomy is reflected not only in the skills or knowledge the learner acquires but also in the way the learner transfers the knowledge to a broader context. In other words, an effective and autonomous learner is sensible of choosing appropriate learning strategies as well as capable of conveying these strategies to other learning.

To conclude, autonomous learning cannot be

simply associated with the ideas of self-determination or independence in the learning process. Instead, it should be viewed as a multifaceted and multidimensional notion that can be interpreted and promoted in a wide range of ways (Benson, 2001; Benson, 2013). Autonomous language learners are actively engaged in various aspects of their learning process. To be more specific, they are able to formulate appropriate and applicable learning objectives, adopt effective learning strategies and self-monitor their learning process.

The previous understanding of autonomous learning in the 1980s tended to focus on learners taking control over the learning process (Holec, 1981), which leads to increasing attention to self-access and self-instructional language learning (Little et al., 2017). It is, however, worth noting that autonomous learning is not equivalent to the absence of teachers' intervention or giving learners the maximal independence (Esch, 1998). On the contrary, according to a more recent view, an interdependent relationship between teachers and learners are acknowledged and teachers' involvement in the classroom is believed to play a crucial role in allowing and assisting learners to develop autonomous learning (Camilleri-Grima, 2007; Smith, 2008). According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory in second language acquisition (SLA), the importance of social interactions with the more knowledgable and skilled others are stressed. That is to say, it is significant for teachers to provide learners with scaffolding support in the process of learning a foreign language, guiding them progressively towards more profound knowledge and eventually greater independence.

Based on the proposition that teachers should be a part of learners' autonomous learning, a wide range of activities and strategies can be applied to promote greater learner involvement and initiative in autonomy classrooms, such as insisting on using the target language, applying interactive and collaborative learning activities, encouraging discussion and reflection and making learners aware of curriculum requirements, etc (Little et al., 2017).

3. Communicative Language Teaching

Another critical aspect in terms of developing learners' language proficiency is communicative language teaching. When globalisation started to make an impact on the world, the idea of using language as a means to communicate has started to gain attention since the 1960s and 1970s (Richards, 2015). The construct of communicative competence as how a person uses a language in an appropriate manner with his or her knowledge as a communicative resource is initially proposed by Hymes (1972). Communicative competence includes two aspects: firstly, the ability to use languages for various communicative functions, such as description, complaints, suggestions, etc; secondly, the ability to use appropriate language for the context, such as the setting, the participants and the activity (Richards, 2015).

The underlying principle of this concept is different from the traditional grammar-based teaching methods, such as Audiolingual and Grammar-Translation method, therefore, leads to a new approach to teaching languages, which is communicative language teaching (CLT), also known as communicative approach. CLT is not only concerned with language learners' spoken skills but also written grammar as well as the appropriate use of specific language features (Harmer, 2015). To help learners develop communicative competence, four sub-competence areas need to be taken into consideration: grammatical competence (the ability to produce utterances with correct grammar and vocabulary); sociolinguistic competence (the ability to understand and create accurate utterances in line with the context); strategic competence (the ability to recognize and solve communication problems as they arise and the ability to improve communication effectiveness); and discourse competence (the ability to produce coherent and cohesive utterances) (Canale & Swain,1980; Canale, 1983).

In a CLT classroom, the learners are expected to actively participate in the collaborative activities rather than being expected to produce error-free utterances, and the teacher serves as a facilitator and a monitor instead of a model for accurate language use (Richards, 2006).

Communicative language teaching is a learner-centred approach that enables learners to use the language for a variety of real-world tasks (Richards, 2015). In traditional teaching, learners are often expected to produce grammatically correct utterances, which is conveying a subliminal message that learning a language is simply a tool to achieve high scores

or academic success in examinations rather than an essential means to communicate with the world. Communicative language teaching, on the other hand, encourages learners to carry out a wide range of meaningful tasks to learn how to use the language for various functions and purposes (Richards, 2006), which mirrors the real world outside the language classroom. Therefore, it is more motivating for language learners (Harmer, 2015). Furthermore, as communicative language teaching encourages a variety of collaborative learning activities, such as role plays, group works and project work, social interactions and communications are considerably involved in the classroom (Richards, 2006), which is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory.

4. Intercultural Language Learning

While communicative language teaching assumes that language learners will 'naturally' develop their language competence and even ultimately achieve a native-like proficiency through bridging the information gaps, it has underestimated the value of culture (Corbett, 2003). However, to prepare our learners for a global future, it is also critical for language teachers to integrate the cultural elements into language classroom to help learners develop intercultural awareness and competence. As culture and intercultural knowledge is not something that learners can simply pick up on their own (Liddicoat, 2008), the importance of intercultural language teaching (ILT) in the classroom should be addressed.

The ultimate goal of intercultural language learning is to develop intercultural competence, which Fantini and Tirmizi (2006) define as "a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself (p.12)'.

Byram (1997) has initially combined the two components of communicative and intercultural competence and proposed an seminal and influential model of intercultural communication competence (ICC), which consists of five components (savoirs): attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical awareness.

According to Byram's (1997) ICC model, attitudes demonstrates respect, openness and readiness to 'to suspend disbelief and

judgement with respect to others' meanings, beliefs and behaviours' as well as 'a willingness to suspend belief in one's own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging (p.34)'. Simply put, learners are not supposed to evaluate the other and their cultures based on their own judgement and prejudice, even the positive ones, which might also hinder mutual understanding (Byram, 1997).

Knowledge refers to the familiarity of one's own social groups and the social groups of the other cultures and being aware of general processes of societal and individual interactions. To achieve this, skills are required. Firstly, learners need to possess the skills of interpreting and relating. That is to say, teachers are expected to equip learners with the skills that allow them to understand unfamiliar cultures and associate those cultures to the ones that they are familiar with. Secondly, learners need to have skills of discovery and interaction, which means that learners should be able to explore and acquire knowledge of new cultures and to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the real-time communication and interaction constraints.

Finally, it is significant for teachers to help learners develop critical awareness; therefore, while learners adopt a more open-minded and tolerant attitude toward the beliefs and values of other cultures, they still maintain their own sets of values.

Intercultural language learning should be a key element in language learning and teaching. While some non-native English speakers possess a relatively high level of English proficiency, they might still come across as rude or impolite to native speakers due to cultural differences. For example, while ordering food, some non-native speakers might say 'I want fish and chips please', rather than 'Can I have fish and chips please?'. Even though both of the utterances are grammatically correct, the latter one seems more pragmatically appropriate. This is something that teachers need to bear in mind while helping our learners use English more appropriately and efficiently to become a global citizen, but unfortunately, this is also something that does not often appear in the traditional textbook or curriculum (Nguyen, 2011).

5. Educational Implications

Drawing on the foundational understanding from the previous discussion, there are several educational implications from different aspects that can be applied to the ESL classroom to develop learner autonomy, communicative and intercultural competence.

Motivation

Firstly, it has been generally acknowledged that motivation is an essential factor for foreign language learning (Brown, 2007; Ushioda, 1996). A strong and positive correlation between motivation and autonomous learning is also pointed out. For example, according to a study conducted by Spratt et al. (2002), which investigates Hong Kong tertiary students' perceptions of responsibility and their actual practice of autonomous learning inside and outside the language classroom, motivation plays a critical role of learner autonomy, and the lack of motivation might hinder the development of autonomous learning. As Ushioda (1996) remarks, 'without motivation, there is no autonomy (p. 40)'. Therefore, to encourage learner autonomy, teachers first need to develop learners' motivation (Spratt et al., 2002).

Therefore, we need to understand our learners' motivations. That is to say, we are expected to understand the reasons why our learners are eager to study English or why they are reluctant to do it. There are two types of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, both of which have significant effect on academic achievements and learners' inclination to improve their learning outcomes (Brown, 2007). The extrinsically motivated learners often expect an external reward in return or to avoid punishments (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Sometimes learners will work hard on something that they are not necessarily interested in because the task completion will lead to certain benefits or rewards, such as a satisfactory grade in an examination, or the failure of completion might result in possible negative consequences.

By contrast, intrinsic motivation refers to participating in an activity for the sake of inherent satisfaction and pleasure (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). For example, young learners might enjoy fun classroom games or some learners like practicing pronunciation because they like the sound of English. Reflecting on my previous job of teaching young learners, who were too young to analyze language or learn vocabulary, were highly motivated when we brought songs, games and cartoons into the learning environment, and thus, they pick up pronunciation and listening quickly from these activities. Spratt et al. (2002) suggest that teachers should focus on learners' intrinsic motivation and on helping learners build confidence in the efficacy of their own efforts.

Another aspect regarding motivation is the instrumental and integrative orientation proposed by Gardner and Lambert (1972). The instrumental orientation motivates learners to achieve practical and utilitarian purposes through the use of language, while the integrative orientation refers to learners' positive attitudes and interests in learning a language and participating in the social interactions (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). The integrative orientation is often viewed as one of the most essential determinant in the success of language learning. Therefore, to enhance learners' integrative orientation, it is imperative to develop their cultural and intercultural awareness in the language classroom, such as introducing various speech acts and social activities.

In any case, it is our responsibility to understand our learners' motivations in order to work towards providing a learning environment and activities which they enjoy and desire, and which help them develop learning autonomy and optimal learning outcomes.

Meaningful and purposeful classroom tasks

Since all communicative acts take place in a certain situation and language is rarely fully understood without a context, it is our job to provide students with a realistic context in the language classroom tasks (Harmer, 2015). To make the tasks more meaningful, for example, we can use engaging context and materials that stimulate interest from the learners and encourage them to interact and negotiate spontaneously with each other by giving students specific roles during tasks.

Furthermore, while undoubtedly book-based language exercises still have a significant part to play in helping students notice key language features and improve accuracy, there should be space in our curriculum for collaborative learning and communicative practices in pairs or groups, such as role play, information gap, interview, opinion sharing, discussion or debate

(Harmer, 2015; Richards, 2015).

During communicative tasks, learners sometimes would become reluctant to participate if they felt that they might be judged or reprimanded for making a mistake. Therefore, effective strategies to provide both positive and correct feedback need to be employed so that learners appreciate the value of trying. Additionally, it can be worth waiting until the task is finished before providing feedback, so as to keep a focus on meaning, and not interrupt the flow of the activity (Brown, 2007).

Online and technological resources

Online resources can be another valuable tool to develop learner autonomy and intercultural communicative competence. Due to the more recent emergence and development of digital literacies, which refers to a variety of communicative practices involving technologies (e.g. the use of mobile devices and the Internet) to produce reading and writing activities, there have been concerns regarding the change to the modes of autonomous language learning and the understanding of dimensions of autonomy (Benson, 2013). A study conducted with 279 undergraduate foreign language students at a Hong Kong university reveals that learners are actively engaged in self-directed learning with technological resources (i.e. songs, videos, movies, entertainment TV), and it facilitates language learning (Lai & Gu, 2011).

Online and digital resources are conducive to promoting learner autonomy as well as intercultural communicative competence. Recalling from my experience as a language learner, I found online resources helpful in learning a language outside the classroom, particularly foreign movies, TV series and songs. It not only significantly improves my listening skills and vocabulary, but also helps me better comprehend the cultures of English-speaking countries in context. The British fantasy-adventure television programme Merlin, for example, helps me gain a deeper understanding of the Arthurian legends, and watching an American sitcom television Fresh Off the Boat allows me to see how a Chinese family struggles to adapt to the American culture. Research has also indicated that online resources and media are a useful tool to develop intercultural communicative competence. Yue (2019), for example, has conducted an empirical study to explore Chinese college learners' engagement in viewing foreign films in a language classroom and has suggested that watching foreign movies with a variety of cultural components (such as Disney film Mulan in this study) is instrumental in cultivating learners' intercultural communicative competence. Drawing on my personal reflection and the illumination from this study, teachers are suggested to find appropriate and relevant foreign movies, TV series and books from online resources and recommend them to learners. Additionally, teachers can encourage learners to explore these multimedia options outside of the language classroom as well as incorporating them into the language class and designing communicative tasks based on them. On top of that, apart from their values to developing learners linguistic competence and intercultural communicative competence, they are beneficial to learner autonomy as learners have the options and freedom to choose the content they like.

6. Conclusion

With the continuing globalization, there has been a paradigm shift in the field of English language learning and teaching from focusing on linguistic competence to a current emphasis on intercultural communicative competence (Yue, 2019). Therefore, as a teacher in ESL, we are excepted to not only teach the linguistic features in the language classroom, such as grammar and vocabulary, but also constantly strive to explore methods for improving teaching skills and developing learners intercultural communicative competence in order to prepare them for the future challenges in the global world. In addition, the teacher plays a facilitator role in inspiring curiosity and creativity, motivating students to become more responsible in their language learning, and promoting autonomous lifelong learning, which can be a challenging, painstaking and also rewarding undertaking.

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