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To Create a Learner-centered, Communicative, Intercultural Classroom

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Abstract: This paper explores the integration of learner autonomy, communicative language teaching (CLT), and intercultural language teaching to create a learner-centered, communicative, and intercultural English language classroom. Through a review of relevant literature, the study analyzes the theoretical foundations, practical applications, and challenges associated with each approach. It highlights the roles of teachers in fostering autonomy, the balance between fluency and accuracy in CLT, and the importance of cultural awareness in language education. Based on the findings, practical implications are proposed for designing effective classroom practices in Chinese EFL contexts, emphasizing teacher roles, selective use of authentic materials, and motivational strategies to enhance students' communicative and intercultural competencies.

Keywords: Learner autonomy; Communicative language teaching; Intercultural competence; Classroom design

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1. Introduction

With the development of globalization from last century, foreign language learning is a compulsory course for every student in the 21th century, where English is the most universally accepted language. According to the British Council, there are about 1.5 billion English learners in the world, of which 750 million people learn English as a foreign language and 375 million people learn English as a second language.

Dozens of foreign language teaching methods have been proposed by scholars at home and abroad, such as grammar-translation methods, communicative language teaching, the direct method, and audiolingualism. Each method or approach owns its benefits and shortcomes in language teaching and learning. For example, communicative language learning is popular for its practice of communicative skills but loses some credits in grammar accuracy. This paper introduces and analyzes several influential and widely used teaching methods, and probes into the development trend of English teaching methods at the present stage, hoping to provide valuable reference for English teaching in China.

In this assignment, the author firstly reviewed autonomous learning which is a learner-centered learning strategy. Learner autonomy is the key subject of autonomous learning and the definition changes with the deeper research of autonomous learning. Besides, learner autonomy is identified into different categories according to its levels and types. Then, teachers' role of autonomous learning is discussed. Secondly, communicative language teaching contributes to a communicative classroom. A brief history of communicative language teaching is introduced, followed by several typical and popular activities in communicative classrooms. However, communicative language received some criticisms which should not be ignored. Thirdly, intercultural language teaching will be introduced from definitions, pedagogical principles, and challenges for teaching. Finally, implications for the future teaching are proposed by the author based on the literature review and personal experiences or understandings.

2. Literature review

To create a learner-centered classroom, communicative, intercultural classroom, the author will discuss from the following three perspectives: autonomous learning, communicative language teaching, and intercultural language teaching.

2.1. Autonomous learning

2.1.1. Introduction

Autonomous learning is the process in which learners take responsibilities for their learning and identified that teachers play a part in this process. Autonomy origins from 1960s in humanism field and was introduced to language education field in 1970s ^[1]. For the past decades, autonomous learning is a popular topic to investigate and scholars have published abundant articles and books on it, though the item of autonomy origins from philosophy, rather than a linguistic concept ^[2]. The most widely cited definition of autonomy is Holec's as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" ^[3]. To be more specific, learners can decide by themselves, what to learn, when to learn, where to learn, and how to learn. Much freedom is given to manage their learning.

Dam showed how autonomy principles can be combined into classrooms with no self-access or professional instructions ^[4]. This research, combining autonomy and classrooms together, contributed to a renewed focus on autonomy in 1990s. Another rise in interest of autonomy is due to the popularity of self-access centers and the growth of computer-assisted language learning and teaching. Thus, in this turning period, language teachers had to accept to deconstruct the traditional language classrooms while reconstruct language pedagogy ^[5]. For example, Little discussed learner autonomy and teacher autonomy in language classrooms to provoke the quality of "pedagogical dialogue" ^[6]. One of the most vital developments of autonomy is that autonomy is identified as an attribute of learners rather than learning situations ^[1,3,7].

2.1.2. Levels of autonomy: Proactive autonomy and reactive autonomy

The previous section gives a brief history of the definition of learner autonomy with three remarkable stages in the development of learner autonomy from 1980s. In this section, two levels of autonomy are introduced for deep understanding. The first one is *proactive autonomy*. Proactive autonomy refers to confirm learners' uniqueness and establish their directions in a personal timetable [8]. To be more specific, proactive autonomy highly emphasizes on actions that are going to be done by learners, such as, taking responsibilities of their

study, deciding learning goals, choosing learning strategies, and assessing the knowledge they have gained. The other level of autonomy is *reactive autonomy*. It can be the primary step to proactive autonomy in learning or achieve goals. Learners with reactive autonomy who do not set up their own directions, can manage their own resources autonomously due to achieve aims, once they are set directions ^[9].

2.1.3. Versions of learner autonomy: Technical, psychological, and political

Benson first introduced the idea of *versions of learner autonomy* and identified versions of learner autonomy into three types: *technical*, *psychological* and *political* ^[10]. Firstly, the technical versions are identified as the action of learning a language but not enrolling in formal classes or hiring instructors. Secondly, psychological versions shows that autonomy is a concept of attitudes and abilities that enables learners to take control of education. Thirdly, political versions of autonomy centers on how to set up conditions which give learners power over own learning and institution backgrounds. These three versions of autonomy offer a preliminary beginning for analyzing connections between autonomy and other theories in learning ^[1].

2.1.4. Teachers' roles in autonomous learning

There are several variants on the core concept of autonomy, based on the review of learner autonomy. From teachers' view, autonomy is mostly associated with institution and classroom learning plans within defined curriculum [11]. According to Little, instructors "get started with themselves" by assessing beliefs, pedagogical methods, and expectations for the classroom, to foster more learner autonomy [6]. Thus, teachers play a part in the classrooms. Fumin and Li conducted empirical research to discover what role teachers play in language classrooms to develop learner autonomy [12]. In the setting of learner autonomy at the college level, teachers' roles have expanded beyond that of mere lecturers transferring information from the pages of a textbook. They need to step up to bigger and better responsibilities. In their valid sample of experiment, 1308 samples in China were freshmen while 1181 were sophomores. None of them were English majors but all of them studied English for at least 6 years. Participants were required to answer a questionnaire designed in the frame of five-point Likert scale to investigate teachers' role in regulating learning, facilitate resources, organizing classrooms, and instructing learning. The results of this research confirmed the four roles that teachers have played in teaching. In addition, teachers' role as "learning regulators" received high agreement in the questionnaire and analysis, that is, learning regulators are the most significant role that teachers have in fostering learner autonomy in learning. Other researchers have the same results with Fumin and Li's that teachers' role as learning regulators are the most crucial one [13-15]. In the implication part, the author will discuss some strategies of improving learner autonomy to create a learner-centered classroom [12].

2.2. Communicative language teaching

Learner autonomy is the focus of communicative language teaching. The author will discuss communicative language teaching approach in this part.

2.2.1. A brief introduction of communicative language teaching

In the 1960s, fast globalization development made difference in various fields, e.g. travelling, education, business, etc. This situation challenged the language educators reviewed teaching approaches at that time. Thus, communicative language teaching rose to meet the needs [16]. Communicative language teaching

intends to assess language competences through the context of social interaction and anticipates growth via deep learning ^[17]. The idea of communicative language teaching can be dated back to Hymes, who raised the concept of *communicative competence* to make effective use of language ^[18]. Communicative competence refers to capacity to effectively apply the language they are currently studying in a particular social situation ^[18]. The most remarkably further research of communicative competence in communicative language teaching was elaborated by Canale and Swain ^[19]. They continued that communicative competence consists of a) grammatical competence, b) sociolinguistic competence, c) discourse competence, and d) strategic competence. Since focusing on real life and focusing on authentic materials are two of the typical characteristics of communicative learning, some scholars disputed that practice/materials in a communicative language teaching classroom should confirm with the real life while some scholars held the view that authentic materials in communicative language teaching classrooms were not necessary if keep authentic learning processes in mind for special designs ^[20–21].

2.2.2. Classroom practice in communicative language teaching

As to communicative language teaching, teaching materials are mainly from authentic texts, so a task for language teachers is to design proper activities for language learners in the classrooms. Oral activities are trendy in communicative language teaching classrooms, rather than focusing on grammar features through reading or writing. Based on previous theoretical and empirical studies, some typical teaching activities can be applied in the language classrooms as following [16, 22]. Here the author will introduce two types briefly.

Information-gap activities: The information gap is an interactive activity in which students successfully acquire previously unknown material in the target language. This activity requires learners to talk with somebody for their unknown information. Jigsaw is a typical information-gap activity. Each attendant or each group is given part of information from reading or listening, and they need to exchange this information by using the target language.

Role play: It is usually a pair work for learners to improve their oral proficiency in a given context. Learners are assigned to play a role in a context with some hints or clues to communicate with others.

2.2.3. Criticisms on communicative language teaching

Though it is a new trend method meeting current needs at that time, communicative language teaching approach received a lot of controversial opinions. Scholars who support the application of communicative language teaching hold view that, for one thing, communicative language teaching encourages learners to develop their ability to use English independently by emphasizing fluency in the language they learnt ^[23]. For the other thing, Communicative language teaching prioritizes allowing learners to utilize the language in a communicative environment to meet their requirements in real-life conversation ^[24–25].

However, communicative language teaching received various criticisms, though it benefits learners' usage of target language. Firstly, Swan revealed that the theory of communicative language teaching resulting in confusing in the application of communicative language teaching, because plenty of confusing vocabulary inputting to learners based on authentic materials for teaching [26]. Thus, from the author's perspective, communicative language teaching is more suitable for language learners who are in intermediate or advanced levels because they are able to deal with difficult words or complex structures from the authentic materials.

Secondly, communicative language teaching gives priority to fluency rather than grammar and

pronunciation ^[27]. As Hughes states that communicative language teaching produce language learners with fluency but inaccuracy ^[28]. In other words, language learners who are taught by communicative approach focus on fluently communicating but pay less attention on grammar rules or accurate pronunciations.

Thirdly, communicative language teaching may be difficult to put into practice due to teachers' ability and requirement of teaching equipment and enough authentic sources [27, 29]. In other words, this kind of situation emphasizes on language teachers' own ability and proficiency in language. Multiple teaching materials are attractive for learners to concentrate on the classrooms and enough authentic sources assure the input of target language, but it is a challenge for language teachers to find source texts and design them for classes.

2.2.4. Personal reflection

Communicative language teaching which benefits for creating a communicative classroom, has its own challenges for both teachers and learners, but its advantage should not be ignored. For one thing, It is an effective teaching approach for teachers to practise language learners' oral communicative skills, but grammar drills need to be developed as supplementary [30]. For the other thing, language teachers are required to discover various authentic materials and do curriculum design, which implies that getting assistance from searching engines or open AI are effective for class designing [31].

2.3. Intercultural language teaching

Culture is quickly becoming one of the most important topics to discuss when it comes to the teaching of languages. On the other hand, there is a broad spectrum of approaches to both the study of culture and the instruction of culture as a component of language acquisition. A growing number of individuals have started to formulate a multicultural approach to the instruction of language [33–35]. The goal of intercultural language education is to teach culture in a manner that simultaneously enhances one's language abilities as well as one's ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries.

2.3.1. An introduction of intercultural language teaching

There are two approaches to the teaching of culture that may be discovered in conversations about language education. These approaches are referred to as a cultural orientation and an intercultural orientation respectively [36]. The purpose of language learning has shifted in response to recent developments in global mobility, and interconnectivity. According to Portera, the current learners must develop numerous international abilities in order to handle and learn from all intercultural contacts [37]. Intercultural language teaching was a necessity to meet the shift of aims of language teaching. Intercultural teaching demands merely mutual respect and a desire to share ideas and learn from one another. The term "intercultural language teaching" refers more to a general "intercultural perspective" from which languages are taught and learnt than to any specific technique or strategy to doing so [35]. According to Hyde, intercultural competence refers to the capacity to engage in conversation with members of other cultures, which we are aware to be distinct from our own [38]. Because of the urgent need for interculturally competence, it seems to reason that language educators would react to this need by focusing more on intercultural language education. If we are serious about preparing the next generation of global citizens, we must engage in intercultural language teaching and learning [39]. Intercultural language teaching's overarching objective is to guide students step-by-

step toward intercultural competence by guiding them through the process of learning a foreign language and culture [34]. This will ultimately help students transcend their own limited worldview.

2.3.2. Principles for teaching and learning languages from an intercultural perspective

The teaching of international language competence in the classroom revolves primarily around five overarching themes [40].

Active construction is the idea that in order to get a nuanced understanding of both their own and the culture they are studying, students must build their own knowledge of the subject. Learners must acquire the skills necessary to identify cultural differences, consider their significance, and craft individual responses to intercultural problems. Instead of presenting culture as an already-completed body of knowledge, the teacher's goal in active creation is to encourage students to observe, examine, and reflect on differences.

Making connections: Students are pushed to draw their own conclusions about the relationships between the classroom materials and their prior cultural, linguistic, and knowledge bases. Developing a viewpoint that compares and contrasts the new with the established might help achieve this goal. This also implies that students' native cultures need to be considered while they study foreign civilizations.

Social interaction: By interacting with others, one may learn about and understand their culture. The learner may encounter differences in communication, exchange perspectives, and explore and practice different answers via social interaction.

Reflection: Having the chance to consider one's encounters with diversity is an important aspect of the intercultural language teaching process. Students must be given opportunity to reflect on how their perception of themselves and others has changed as a result of their exposure to different cultural perspectives. They must also consider how their prior beliefs and values influence their communication style and the outcomes they want.

Responsibility: Students learn that it is their job to communicate well in all of their languages and to create a worldview that respects other languages, countries, and people.

2.3.3. Challenges in intercultural language teaching in China

Government attitude: China government's careful attitude towards culture invasion stopped the development of intercultural language in China. Culture relativity theory (CRT) views that cultures cannot be judged as beneficial or bad ^[40]. The diversity of human experience is the subject matter to be mastered. This dualistic view of culture, with its emphasis on what is superficial and what is essential, distorts what pupils learn about other societies and leads them astray. This is a contributing factor to the fact that intercultural education in China is behind that in the West ^[41].

Textbooks: The textbooks in China are customized to fit local contexts, which only reflected a part of culture. In addition, after-class exercises aim to assess the linguistic knowledge, such as, grammar, gap filling, single choices. Moreover, instead of being systematically structured in the text books, culture knowledge is placed in the cultural note section as background information for students to memorize and recognize rather than practices.

Teacher qualification: English teachers at Chinese universities have extensive training and experience in language instruction. However, it is undeniable that the vast majority of instructors have never even traveled abroad, much less experienced the culture they are supposed to be teaching about. The lack of cultural

training and instruction these educators acquired as students means they lack cultural sensitivity. Most educators rely on the textbook's cultural notes to help their students understand and appreciate the text's cultural context; this is a long cry from fostering students' intercultural communicative competence.

Student motivation: The key elements impacting motivation are the substantial linguistic and cultural differences between Chinese and English. Different students' reasons for learning lead to divergent perspectives on cultural tensions and levels of classroom collaboration. It's not easy to get pupils involved in classroom discussion on cultural differences and similarities.

3. Implications for future class design

Based on the literature review and the author's experience of language learning and teaching, some strategies to create a learner-centered, communicative, and intercultural classroom.

3.1. Identify teachers' roles to create a learner-centered classroom

The term "student-centered learning" is used to describe a wide range of instructional strategies that are designed with the learners in mind. The goal of student-centered teaching is to revitalize the educational experience for both students and teachers. A teacher's role is analogous to that of a "guide on the side", providing help and direction while pupils work toward common objectives ^[42]. The duties of English instructors should not be diminished in an environment where student agency is emphasized, but rather expanded upon ^[43]. Teachers have a variety of responsibilities, including but not limited to: answering students' questions; providing a variety of resources related to English study; encouraging students to make full use of these resources; planning engaging classroom activities to maximize students' initiative in learning English; assisting students in developing and implementing realistic and individualized study plans and objectives; and using a variety of assessment strategies to evaluate students' progress.

Teachers may fulfill a variety of functions, especially in the provision of curricular materials. Teachers may play an important role as learning regulators and study aides. The importance of these two roles in encouraging student initiative in the classroom significantly outweighs that of classroom organizers. Teachers may help students develop their capacity for independent learning by providing them with direction in self-monitoring and self-regulating their academic work, as well as by instructing them in the use of learner-autonomous practices. The easiest way to fix this is to limit English sessions to a size of no more than 20 students, and ideally no more than 10. By doing so, educators may better cater to their pupils' unique needs while also encouraging more independence in the classroom.

3.2. Strategies to creative a communicative classroom

As discussed above, the appearance of communicative language teaching approach followed the development of the times, though it has its own shortcomes. Thus, it is challenge for teachers to adapt this in the future teaching practice.

First, each grammar as a supplementary for communicative language teaching. Communicative language teaching gives less priority to the accuracy of speaking proficiency. Thus, teaching grammar is a need for communicative language classrooms.

Second, be selective to authentic materials for communicative language teaching. Authentic materials

contain a bulk of confusing or difficult words for EFL learners. It upgrades the difficult level of foreign language learning. In this situation, language teachers are required to select or adapt the materials which is suitable for the learners in a certain level.

Third, corporate with multimedia sources and technologies. For a communicative classroom, teaching with materials from different sources and with the help of information and communication technology, can attract learners to keep paying attention on teachers' talk.

Fourth, make good use of activities. Two types of typical activities in communicative language classrooms were introduced. If teachers try their best to make best use of the activities, activities can provide students with additional opportunities to use English in given contexts. In addition, conversational exercises like "small talk" are great for fostering interpersonal understanding and familiarity via the use of idioms.

3.3. Start an intercultural classroom in Chinese EFL contexts

According to challenges mentioned, some implications as a pre-service teacher will be introduced to start an intercultural classroom in Chinese EFL contexts.

Firstly, design supplementary exercises for language learners to do after class. What cannot be changed is that language teachers and learners have to follow the certain curriculum given by Education Bureau or Schools. Teachers can supplement cultural background knowledge by designing appropriate exercises.

Secondly, immersing in the target language environment is crucial for future language teachers in China. Not only studying or living aboard for a period but also listening and reading via target languages are beneficial for immersion.

Thirdly, arousing language learners' motivation contributes to language proficiency development. If learners' motivation is stimulated, learners are voluntary to get more information of language learning, such as, reading newspapers, watching movies, listening to music in target languages.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, this assignment focuses on the origin and challenges of autonomous learning, communicative language teaching, and intercultural language teaching. After that, series of strategies are proposed to create a learner-centered, communicative, and intercultural language classroom.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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