

Motivating EFL Students in Learner-centered Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Traditional English classroom is teacher-centered, in which teacher dominates the classroom while students sit there listening passively. The demotivation resulting from this requires changing the traditional role of both the teacher and learners. The author of this paper tries to address the challenge in her flipped classroom. In group works, the students participate more in the classroom teaching. They are motivated to prepare for their tasks and present them independently in classroom. In the flipped classroom, both the roles of teacher and learners are changed, and their new roles indicate positive transformation in EFL learning and teaching.

Keywords: Motivation, Flipped class, Learner-centered classroom.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional methods in English language teaching (ELT) have been prevalent for several decades in China, and the demerits have far-reaching influence [14], [15]. It is generally accepted that teachers dominate the classroom while students passively take notes. However, when it comes to the 21st century, the development of multimedia technology and accessibility to online resources make teaching reforms possible. Teacher-centered classroom gradually shifts its emphasis to learner-centered. Correspondingly, the traditional roles of teacher and learner have been changed.

This paper is based on 1), the experience of a traditional learner and its influence on her early teaching years; 2), her reflection as a traditional teacher in her early years of teaching; 3), her reflection on changing the traditional role of teacher and learner in addressing challenges in her teaching. It aims to illustrate from the literature and her experience that the shift from teacher-centered to the learner-centered model could change the traditional role of teachers and learners in the classroom and erase the negative influence of traditional methods in ELT.

2. CONTEXT

The college under this study is located in Conghua, the northern part of Guangzhou, 50 kilometers away from downtown. In the foreign language department, there are approximately 2000 students, with 35 students in each class.

The classroom could accommodate 40 students at most, equipped with a blackboard, a computer with internet access, and a projector in the front of the classroom. The desks and chairs are fixed in rows. Usually, students sit in the same spot since the beginning of the term and are not moving during class.

The students mainly come from Guangdong, a coastal province in southern China. Many of them have seen the tremendous development of their cities and believe that mastery of English could benefit their future employment in the Great Bay Area. They hold the ambitious aim to learn English well, including passing the standardized exams to get certificates, improving their oral English, or obtaining an opportunity to have further study after their graduation. However, their English proficiency is lagging behind the students in public universities in China. For example, around 20% of our students could barely pass TEM 4 (Test for English Majors), while 99% of students in Guangdong Foreign Language Institute (Guangwai)

could score high. In spite of their poor English proficiency, some students remain quite motivational, which inspires the teachers to help them more in teaching.

From 2010, China issues and launches its 2010-2020 National Mid-&-Long Term Educational Reform and Development Plan [3], which encourages teaching reforms from pre-school education to higher education. Schools are required to upgrade teaching facilities and teacher qualifications. Teachers are encouraged to adapt western pedagogical approaches to Chinese context and have more autonomy in classroom reforms. Students' critical thinking and innovative thoughts become one of the benchmarks of quality education. "The strategic goal is to develop each student as 'a whole healthy person' with mental, physical and social well-being, with an emphasis on values, attitudes, ideology, cognitive, affective and interpersonal skills" [8].

2.1 Traditional Thoughts of Teaching in China

Influenced by Confucius thoughts, the traditional teaching model in China is like the transmission of water, where teachers are compared as "full vessels" who pour everything they know to their students. In this "one-way conveyance" [22], teachers serve as a knowledge provider and students as the receiver, with the textbook as the major source of learning. In most of cases, teachers dominate the class and take the responsibility to "interpret, analyse and elaborate" textbooks while students "memorize, repeat and understand" [12]. Generally, the whole society accepts the authority of the teachers and honoring their teachings (zunshi zhongdao). Therefore, traditional teacher-centered class is quite common in Chinese schools.

In the past decades, English language teaching in China is equally under the influence of traditional teaching beliefs. The traditional teaching model is that English teachers follow the curriculum and make sure that their lessons have covered the major and difficult points in the textbook to pass the exams and get good grades. The studies from Chinese and western researchers [15], [18] have shown that the traditional Chinese culture and the broader context of social dynamics exert significant influence on ELT in China.

2.2 The Traditional Role of Teachers in English Classroom

ELT in China has undergone several phases: grammar-translation, audio-lingual methods, and communicative language teaching (CLT) [14] [15]. However, not many schools launch CLT, except for the key universities like Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute (also called Guangwai), which adopted CLT since the 1980s [14]. Traditional methods of ELT are dominant in most schools or universities.

Under the influence of traditional teaching beliefs and the pressure from the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao), the teacher in the traditional ELT classroom is the authoritative knower and provider of English language knowledge. Generally, they have to explain grammar and words bit by bit, in a straightforward and precise way. Usually, teachers do most of the talk and explain all the language points according to their pre-class preparation [14] [22].

2.3 The Traditional Role of Learners in English Classroom

In the traditional ELT classroom, students receive language rules passively [22]. The respect for the teachers is embedded in the students' minds and reflected in their classroom behaviours. Students are sitting there, listening to the teacher and copying notes on the blackboard as much as they could in the whole class. The long-term effect is students' lack of learning responsibility and autonomy [15] [22]. With the increasing number of Chinese students studying abroad, they are labelled as the quiet and uncritical "Chinese learners" [9] or "Asian learners" [6]. Although these labels might be stereotypes, they imply the demerits of traditional ELT in China to a certain degree.

2.4 A Traditional Learner and Teacher

The researcher in this study majored in English Education in a normal university (teacher education university), where all of her teachers were dedicated to their teaching with profound knowledge of the English language. Their detailed explanations of the textbook almost shaped her early teaching characteristics: grammar-translation from word to word and sentence to sentence. Though the students in the normal university were supposed to be the future teachers after graduation, they had few chances of practicing English in class.

In the last term before graduation, there was a one-month teaching practicum, which was tough for them since they were not prepared due to a lack of practical teaching skills. However, at that time, it was a prevalent assumption that students who graduated from normal universities could convey from what they have learned to their students in classroom teaching [20], while many students found it quite tricky, because English teaching is not a physical transmission of language rules.

In the earlier teaching years (2005-2008) of the researcher, she taught the intensive reading course imitating her teachers: preparing each lesson before class, explaining everything in the textbook, writing important language points on the blackboard, and trying to finish the teaching tasks. This way of teaching was quite common in the 20th century and the early 21st century, "teacher-centered didactic teaching remains prevalent in classrooms in both developed urban and less developed rural areas" [17] [20]. Explaining language points in the textbook was the most important task of an EFL classroom, since the text books may be the major source of English language input for many students, which makes the task of helping students understand the text significant in English teaching. However, with the change of time, students behave quite different from what is expected.

2.5 Demotivation of the Students

Five years after her teaching, the researcher began to notice the demotivation of students in class and reflect on her teaching. The conversations with the students clued her in the situation of students' English learning:

- it was difficult for students to concentrate on the class and listen to the teacher talking for 45 minutes.
- they were not entirely clear about what to learn except for reading the textbooks.
- they did not have much output and were not sure about their language proficiency except for the scores in the final exams.

The students' feedback caused her to reflect her learning experience and her early years of teaching, also the demerits of traditional ELT, which include:

- teachers have too much dominance of the classroom, while students remain passive and reliant on the teachers [15] [22].
- teachers' uncreative way of giving lectures is one of the major demotivating factors [4].

- teachers placed "tight thematic control over classroom interaction" while students did not have to chance to initiate any topics, which, in the long run, is harmful to the students linguistic and cognitive development [19].
- there is a gap between what the teachers want to teach in class and what the students want to learn [13].
- students lack "environmental opportunities for actual target language use" [2].
- students lack learning motivation, influenced by the students around them and their "learning attitudes toward the learning situation" [7]. If the vast majority of the students keep silent in class, the rest would probably remain the same.

3. ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE

3.1 Rationale

Unlike the trainees in the Senior Middle School Teacher Training (SMSTT) program who met resistance in adopting CLT after they finished their training in their hometown [14], young teachers in Guangzhou are offered more autonomy in teaching reforms. What's more, new technology in ELT and the introduction of western pedagogical approaches afford technological and theoretical support for teaching reforms. Nunan's [13] learner-centeredness English language education and Ellis's [5] task-based language teaching inspired the researcher to improve students' autonomy in English learning. Gruba et al. [10] have stated the advantages of flipped class in many aspects. One of its salient benefits is that, with the help of multimedia technology, students could get access to the teaching material before class, and finish part of learning tasks before class, while teachers could focus on the challenging part of the text instead of explaining everything from word to word, sentence to sentence.

3.2 Flipped Classroom

The plan for flipped classroom was inspired by above-mentioned theoretical perspectives. Basically, it contains the group work of pre-class preparation, in-class presentation, and post-task feedback. The group work is totally different from the traditional way of passive learning. Instead of relying on teachers, students have to participate in each phase and share more responsibility in their English learning. The platform is no longer the authoritative

place of the teacher, instead, it is the spot of students' sharing their task performance.

3.3 Students' Group Work

At the beginning of the new term, students form their groups, and each group is responsible for specific tasks. To ensure that students have enough time for preparation, all of the tasks to students are informed long before class. Each group will be responsible for two tasks each term, which means they have two times of presentations. These tasks cover text-related background information to detailed analysis of some paragraphs in the text. The tasks are divided into three phases: pre-class preparation, in-class presentation, and post-task reflection.

In the pre-class phase, students have to collaborate with their group members and search textbook-related content on the internet. Online dictionary websites, free Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) websites, and free online library websites are recommended to students. Students search their reading materials or other resources and share them with their teammates. When they finish their reading, they would make the slides and determine their contents of presentation together.

In the in-class presentation phase, students take their turns to present their task and illustrate it according to their slides. They might put their key information in words, pictures, or video clips from the internet and report it to the whole class on the large screen of the projector. Most of the students would try to illustrate their key points in English. The rest of the class will listen to the students who have their turns to do the presentation. They would ask questions if they are not clear about the illustration, and the presenters should explain it in a detailed way.

In the post-task reflection phase, both the teacher and student would make some comments on the presentation: usually, language errors are tolerant, more attention is paid to the presentation's content, whether they have made clear and logical points. The presenters are invited to share their preparations for presentation, which serves as inspiration and stimulus for the rest of the class to face their task challenges.

3.4 The Changed Role of Teacher and Learners

The flipped classroom changes the traditional teacher-dominant class into a learner-centered and erases the demerits of traditional classroom. With the help of multimedia technology and students' online learning out-side-of class, students improve their learning autonomy and prepare for their tasks while teachers do not have to explain the textbook from word to word; instead, teachers could know what the students feel most challenging about their learning tasks and offer most needed instructions. The gap between teacher's teaching and students' expectation is greatly narrowed. Students are collaborative decision-makers about in-class teaching contents. They have more opportunities of using English in class, which develop their English language skills. To win more positive feedback in their group task presentations serves as a kind of motivation for their presentations.

However, a learner-centered classroom doesn't mean the teacher "hands over power, responsibility, and control to the students" [13]. The teacher is now the planner of the learning procedures, which involves students' participating in the teaching process, the instructor of students' learning practice in non-class time, the learner that listens to the students' presentation, the observer that offers appropriate feedback to the students [22].

In a learner-centered classroom, what to learn and how to learn is joint collaboration between teachers and learners [13], since teachers and learners make the decision about classroom teaching together. When they prepare for their task before class, students have more informal language learning activities, in which they become "language users" instead of "language learners" [16].

The in-class presentation part means students as the presenters have to integrate their reading, understanding, and oral expression in their illustration, which is far more efficient in improving their English language proficiency. In making decisions about how to present and what to present, students gradually take more responsibility for their EFL learning; what is more, when students have the opportunity to process their information through different channels, they are more productive [13].

The post-task feedback empowers students to be observers and commentators. When they listen to the other groups' presentations, they could have more inspirations and innovations for their task.

The democracy in the classroom empowers the students to challenge the authority of the teacher and innovations are greatly encouraged [1].

4. CONCLUSION

The traditional methods in ELT in China have been accepted for many years, but their demerits are also salient and could not be denied. Though the public has accepted the set images of teacher and learner for many years, the development of new technology and invent of pedagogical theories make ELT reforms efficient.

In flipped classrooms, the emphasis of ELT has shifted from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness, with the traditional role of teacher and learner changing correspondingly. The teacher transforms from the only knower and controller of the classroom into the planner, the observer, the listener, and the instructor; while students are English language explorers and users instead of passive receivers of English language rules.

However, a learner-centered classroom needs negotiation between teacher and learners, which requires the appropriate instruction from the teacher and spontaneous learning from the learner, a lengthy process, and relentless effort [13]. The way of addressing the challenges in this paper may provide insights for learner-centered classroom reform in China context. More research should be done to collect quantitative and qualitative data to prove its benefits.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Ruixia Huang.

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