

Pedagogical Review on the Learner-Centered, Communicative and Intercultural Language Classroom

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Abstract

Autonomous learning, communicative language teaching (CLT) and intercultural language learning/teaching (ILL/ILT) are essential components in the field of ESL/ EFL education. In the meantime, they are also challenges as well as opportunities for language teachers, who need to keep pace with the development of modern education. This essay will focus on the theoretical groundings, pedagogical implications and reflections of these three aspects (learner autonomy, CLT and ILL/ILT).

Keywords: autonomous learning, communicative language teaching, intercultural language learning/teaching, modern education

1. Introduction

In terms of autonomous learning, it has been widely discussed in educational research. To be specific, it could be regarded as the learner-centered or independent learning, which occurs in and out of class context. Since learners (students) are likely to be involved in the cultivation of self-monitor learning, their teachers may be faced with challenges of helping them to develop such ability.

Concerning communicative language teaching (CLT) and intercultural language learning / teaching (ILL/ILT), they share a common view on language learning, which is aimed at developing intercultural communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Byram, 1997), in other words, language learning is beyond the mastery of linguistic knowledge, but it requires learners to perform their capacity of language use and cultural understanding in social context. At the same time, effective application of CLT and ILT in language classroom would be worth exploring, which may give some directions and inspirations to teachers in need.

2. Autonomous Learning

2.1 Concept and Development of Learner Autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy firstly emerged in the 1980s, which was related to adult education and independent learning systems, it was also viewed as a way that learners do things by themselves (Little, 2007). In this sense, the original description of learner autonomy is defined as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3), which is proposed by Holec (1981). Specifically, he further illustrates that learner autonomy entails a process from directed teaching to self-directed learning, however, such capacity can be acquired in systematic way. Moreover, Holec explores the qualities of autonomous learners, which emphasizes planning, monitoring learning process and self-evaluation based on daily learning management. Different from Holec’s opinions, Dickinson (1987) claims that autonomy is a situation where learners take responsibility to decision making associated with learning and implementation of decisions.

Attention was shifted to learner-centered education in the 1990s, the concept of learner autonomy was redefined in multi-faceted perspectives. Cotterall (1995) argues that autonomy is regarded as the degree which learners

exercise their abilities to use strategies to control the learning. At the same time, Little (1995) insists “the basis of learner autonomy is that learners accepts responsibility for his or her learning” (p. 175). Furthermore, Little (1991) puts emphasis on psychological traits of learner autonomy, which involves the capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action. For level of autonomy, it is categorized into 2 types, respectively proactive autonomy and reactive autonomy (Little, 1999). The former one refers to learners’ individuality and creation of partial directions, whereas the latter refers to initial direction, which enables learners to manage their resources autonomously for fulfillment of goals. For version of autonomy, it is classified into 3 dimensions, namely technical, psychological and political (Benson, 1997). Technical version of learner autonomy refers to an act of language learning without pattern of educational institution and intervention of instructors. The psychological version views autonomy as construction of attitudes and capacities, which enables learners to take initiative to control their learning. The political version aims to achieve structural conditions, which allows learners to monitor their learning progress and institutional setting.

To date, the perception of learner autonomy varies in diverse contexts. Cotterall (2000) indicates that autonomy prompts learners to be responsible for different stages of their learning, which contains goal setting, resources and techniques selection, and process evaluation. In educational setting, learner autonomy involves certain kind of socialization that allows learners to play active role in a democratic society (Benson, 2007). In this sense, it is believed that the notion of learner autonomy is rooted in the 18th and 19th century European philosophy (Benson, 2006). In addition, the 18th-century Europe witnessed the appearance of Enlightenment thinking of autonomy and independence, therefore, autonomy can be viewed as western construct because it has far-reaching influence on modernist thinking about emancipation of individuals in a democratic society (Schmenk, 2005). Nevertheless, from the perspective of the social cognitive theory, autonomy learning has been debated in terms of self-disciplined learning (Lee, 2016). When mentioning self-regulated process, it has been divided into three phases, including performance phase, self-reflection phase and forethought phase (Zimmerman, 2011). In spite of the various perceptions of learner autonomy, Boyadzhieva (2016) points out that autonomy helps learners to cultivate the positive insights about themselves by displaying knowledge about culture, history, benefitting from mutual understanding of diverse community.

2.2 Autonomy in ESL/EFL Classroom

The significance of autonomy in ELT has been recognized over years (Smith, 2008). When mentioning autonomy in ESL/ EFL context, there are three dimensions worth further exploring, including pedagogical implications, strategies for developing autonomy and relevant reflections.

From the view of pedagogical practice, three principles, which determines the achievement of ESL/EFL teaching, are learner involvement, learner reflection and target language use (Little, 1999). Learner involvement requires teacher to draw learners’ attention to their learning progress, which promotes them to set learning goals, make classroom interaction and assess learning outcomes. Learner reflection requires instructor to engage in planning, monitoring and evaluating during teaching/learning process. For target language use, it can be conducted by classroom activities (i.e., group/teamwork). Also, during the collaborative work, on one hand, teacher can offer certain guidance (Scaffolding) when necessary, on the other hand, learners may have opportunities to develop their independent learning. Nevertheless, Thomsen (2003) argues that advanced learners are capable of doing work in target language without instructions. Considering the effectiveness of target language use, language can be produced by learners’ internalization of rules, however, on some occasions, language production should be pushed (Swain, 1985). For assessing learning outcomes, learners are encouraged to write journals in target language in order to recall and evaluate their learning progress (Moon, 1999). In the EFL classroom, learners, who are equipped with high level of autonomy, may engage in self-directed learning activities, such as seize opportunities to use the language, manage their learning activities and monitor their learning (Lee, 2016).

For strategies of fostering autonomy, Illés (2012) maintains the viewpoint that learner autonomy in ELT needs corresponding training. At the same time, so-called training helps learners to deal with particular tasks (Widdowson, 1983a). In details, language learners can develop their autonomy by conducting collaborative work and peers’ evaluation (Chan, 2003). Approaches to promote the development of autonomy could be engaged in real-life communications and solving problems, which stimulates learners’ ability to process linguistic resources (Illés, 2012). Other approaches to encourage autonomous learning can be classified as “strong” or “weak” (Smith, 2003). A “strong” approach is associated with learners’ current level of autonomy in a bottom-up way, which aims to reconstruct “optimal conditions” so that learners can get involve in reflection. Whereas a “weak” approach means that learners are deficient in personal autonomy and need training. Apart from these training strategies, language learners, especially beginners and novices, they may need encouragements on their performances and teacher’s instructions, which better functions on their development of autonomy.

For reflections, it should be put more emphasis on teacher’s attitudes towards learner autonomy and corresponding development of their own autonomy. Benson (2017) notes that teacher autonomy has become one

of the most essential concepts in the domain of autonomy in current years. In the language teaching context, he also puts focus on relation between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. Furthermore, the notion of teacher autonomy means that set teachers free to manage resources in course practice (Allwright, 1990). Meanwhile, teacher autonomy has been viewed as a professional trait, which requires an ability for the self-instruction development (Santoro, 2003). How do teachers utilize their autonomy to promote development of learners' autonomy? Little (2007) provides several suggestions for language teachers. On the one hand, teachers need to identify the initiatives they take in classroom, and they also need to explore their professional skills in an autonomous way, applying to their teaching and learning. On the other hand, teachers need to learn how to handle a variety of target language discourses in the self-directed classroom. It seems that these requirements are challenging and demanding for fostering ESL/EFL learners' autonomy, however, Boyadzhieva (2016) has revealed that the foreign language teachers need to be responsible for encouraging learners to make their decisions independently and take responsibility autonomously. He also mentions that language learners' motivation will be enhanced under careful guidance from teachers. Overall, teachers are encouraged to have self-reflection and set future goals by keeping dairies and learning plans for the better professional development (Humphreys and Wyatt, 2013).

3. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

3.1 Theoretical Background and Developments of CLT

Original understanding of CLT should be traced back to Hymes (1972), who highlights that learning a language is beyond mastering grammatical, lexical and phonological knowledge, meanwhile, learners are in need of developing capacity to use language in the appropriate social context, which is so-called communicative competence. However, Breen and Candlin (1980) point out that the concept of CLT is associated with negotiation, interpretation and expression. At the same time, for the notion of communicative competence, Canale and Swain (1980) conclude that four components consist of communicative competence, which includes the grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Different from Canale and Swain's view, Malathi (2013) attempts to summarize several features of communicative competence in a readable way as followed.

- knowing how to use language for a variety of purposes and functions;
- knowing how to identify use of language in terms of context and interlocutors (formal/informal speech);
- knowing how to understand and use various genres of texts (e.g. narratives, reports);
- knowing how to take control of communication in spite of a lack of language knowledge.

Influenced by the study of Canale and Swain (1980), Sauvignon (2002) summarizes five dimensions of a communicative course, which provides support of theoretical and practical basis of CLT. The first element is language arts, which requires language teachers to use mother tongue (L1) for paying attention to accuracy when doing learning tasks. The second aspect is language for a purpose, which refers to use language for the fulfillment of authentic communication goals. The third one is personal English language use, which means learners' existing identity in English. The fourth is theater arts, it relates to offer learners with tools that they need to use in a new language, for instance, negotiate for meaning. The last one is beyond the classroom, it means that learners have opportunities to use language outside the classroom. Scholars mentioned above reach agreement on that the core of language learning should be based on real communication instead of simply on aspect of language vocabulary, grammar and structure. In addition, compared with other teaching methods (i.e., audiolingual method), CLT aims to manipulate communicative and meaningful information activities in order to get rid of structure-based instruction, and it is also applied to creative classroom tasks (e.g., role-play), which facilitates L2 learners' motivations (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

Nevertheless, some concerns about effectiveness and practicality of CLT emerge. Five concerns in implementation of CLT are proposed by Littlewood (2007), namely classroom management, avoidance of English, minimal demands on language competence, incompatibility with assessment requirements and confliction with educational traditions. Additionally, CLT neglects the connection between language and culture, and it underestimates the needs to understand communication between non-native speakers and native speakers as multi-cultural communication rather than communication in target language (Crozet and Liddicoat, 1999). Other criticisms of CLT come from the perspective of classroom-based practice. Communicative course, even if it is well designed, it cannot guarantee meaningful communication in language classroom as communication itself may be or may not be accomplished via activities (Widdowson, 1990). By observation and analysis of class activities, which involves form-focused and accuracy-focused instruction, Nunnan (1987) is skeptical about interactions in communicative class, which may not be fairly communicative. More explicit view on CLT is that its structure fails to meet expectations of L2 learners, and few evidences show that it is communicative in the L2 classroom (Legutke & Thomas, 1991).

Despite doubts about CLT, a growing attention is shifted to the integrated multi-skill instruction with an emphasis on meaningful communication and development of learners' communicative competence (Hinkel, 2006). Such instruction follows the principles of CLT, meanwhile, pedagogical goals, instructional resources and procedures also plays a crucial role in communicative language use. Richards and Rodgers (2001) indicate that when learners engage in meaningful communication, they are aware of learning objectives and resources during less imitation of integrated language teaching.

3.2 Implementation of CLT in ESL/EFL Classroom

Discussion in this part will mainly focus on CLT in ESL/ EFL teaching practice as well as relevant reflections.

As what has been mentioned before, CLT theory views that language learning takes place when classroom practices create real and meaningful communications for learners. At the same time, the goal of CLT is to encourage language learners to use language effectively for the purpose of authentic communication needs, rather than exclusively focus on grammar rules or vocabulary, which can be regarded as communicative competence (Hiep, 2007). Although CLT has its superiorities, some teachers are faced with difficulty to apply it to teaching practice. Therefore, how to implement CLT becomes a central issue. It has been considered as a prevailing trend to integrate the CLT with L2 skills, including speaking, listening, reading and writing. (Hinkel, 2006). For teaching speaking, learners need to notice content, lexical knowledge, discourse and phonetic system (Trarone, 2005). Besides, L2 speakers need to identify and correct problems during the process of interactions because speaking and comprehending are simultaneously working (Hinkel, 2006). In communicative approach, L2 spoken activities require language fluency as well as accuracy (Fotos, 2002). In terms of these two aspects, according to Ellis (2003), well-organized tasks (narratives and descriptions) can boost L2 oral production. In details, engage students in debates and problem-solving tasks can benefit grammatical and lexical diversity in language use. Apart from this, task repetition provides learners opportunities to pay attention to fluency, accuracy and linguistic complexity. Banciu and Jireghie (2012) suggest that real-life context facilitates communication, which means teacher need to create a context that students may encounter in authentic life. They also mention that learners' motivation to engage in communication comes from meaningful topics in life. Additionally, for teaching grammatical rules, they recommend teachers to design well-balanced classroom learning activities so that learners will be able to concentrate on one or more items of the target language until they can acquire it as a whole. In communicative classrooms, teachers play a role of facilitators, who need to supervise and monitor their students' learning performance, and they tend to listen more and speak less (Banciu & Jireghie, 2012), which provides sufficient opportunities for learners to express themselves in target language. CLT puts focus on effective communication between teachers and students as it considers communication has a social purpose, and its emphasis should be based on meaning (convey information or finish tasks) instead of form (accuracy of language) (Banciu & Jireghie, 2012). Furthermore, teachers should manipulate textbook in a flexible and communicative way and get good command of language for dealing with unexpected situations (Banciu & Jireghie, 2012).

Considering classroom activities in CLT, Malathi (2013) concludes four types of activities: accuracy versus fluency activities, mechanical/meaningful/communicative practice, information-gap activities, jig-saw activities. For the comparison between accuracy and fluency activities, fluency-based practice should focus on natural and meaningful use of language, and it also requires application of the communication strategies, whereas accuracy-based practice should focus on practicing language out of context and focus on structure of language samples, and it is controlled in classroom use. For mechanical practice, it is a controlled activity which learners can cope with without necessarily understanding the language they use, such as repetition drills and substitution drills. For meaningful practice, it refers to a task in which language is controlled but learners need to make meaningful decision. Moreover, for communicative practice, it relates to use language in authentic communication context. For information gap practice, it refers to the state where people communicate with each other in authentic situation for receiving information they do not have. For jig-saw practices, they follow the basic principles of information-gap practice. In details, jig-saw task requires students in groups and each group has a part of information needed to complete whole task. During doing this task, students may use language to communicate in a meaningful way.

For reflections on CLT practice, Bax (2003) indicates that numerous teachers welcome CLT as they believe the implementation of CLT is compatible with students' goals of learning English. In the meantime, during the practice in CLT, teachers will experience a process of reflection, this is to say, they will become aware of their instruction and start to check their own understanding of CLT, and make decisions on their actions (Hiep, 2007). More importantly, teachers are able to choose the best way to manage their class once they are permitted and encouraged to do so (Bax, 2005). Additionally, in terms of teachers' roles in CLT, they should be encouraged to be facilitators as well as participants in class activities (Breen & Candlin, 1980) for the purpose of promoting the language teaching and learning. In a word, teachers can be manageable and reflective as long as they make good

use of CLT in their classrooms.

4. Intercultural Language Learning/Teaching (ILL/ILT)

4.1 Theoretical Introduction of ILL/ILT

With the globalization of English learning, communicative language teaching (CLT) cannot satisfy needs of multi-culturalism and internationalism (Song, 2004). Consequently, Approach to language education draws attention on intercultural language teaching (ILT). Byram and Flemming (1998) points out that the ESL/ EFL learning widely occurs in intercultural environment. Language learning, which is related to cultural element, it not only promotes learners' L2 skills, but also benefits development of their cultural skills, which means that learners will deepen their own understanding of how language use helps them to fulfill cultural goals, and they will be encouraged to generate self-reflection on their native language (L1) and its social functions (Corbett, 2003). When it comes to the goal of intercultural method, learners aim at achieving intercultural communicative competence, which refers to a complex component of useful knowledge and skills (Byram, 1997). Moreover, the intercultural instruction aims to train language learners to be "diplomats", who are capable of viewing diverse cultures based on current understanding (Corbett, 2003). However, similar to the perspective of Corbett, Song (2004) provides more detailed descriptions about purposes of intercultural approach, and she explains that intercultural learners acquire communicative competence in L1 and L2 as well as cultivate multi-cultural consciousness, which enables them to judge their behaviors critically through the communications with others.

Despite different remarks on goals of intercultural language education, ways to develop intercultural communicative competence (ICC) are summarized by Corbett (2003), he claims that culture should play a regular role in information exchange so that learners have opportunities to self-reflect on how the information is conveyed and how various cultures produce mutual impacts in social interactions. Other notions, such as linguaculture, intercultural speaker and intercultural, are worth exploring. The term, linguaculture refers to how language is integrated with culture, and it shapes humans' conventional ideas, values and behaviors (Agar, 1994). For another term, intercultural speaker is proposed by Byram and Zarate (1997), which relates to foreign language learners or culture learners as they cross boundaries and spread cultural information. In details, intercultural speaker is a person who possesses multiple cultural and social identities and has ability to make connection with people in a variety of settings (Byram & Fleming, 1998). The last term, intercultural space, it can be viewed as a place between native and target cultures where all actions occur in terms of certain cultural occasions (Song, 2004).

Nevertheless, some scholars still show doubtful attitudes towards the integration of culture and language learning. Risager (2006) questions the connection between language and culture in L2 education, and he indicates that these two factors should be separated from the position of EFL/EFL learners. On the opposite side, Gumperz and Levinson (1996) has examined that language itself is a part of culture so they can be unseparated in meaningful way. Furthermore, intercultural approach may overlook the cultural possibilities in a society and only focus on the certain group (e.g., adults), which results in stereotypes of culture (Crawford-Lange & Lange, 1984).

Even if there are existing supports and skepticisms of ILT/ILL, it has been admitted that such approach highlights the possibility of multi-culturalism in language classroom and application of learners' emerging understanding for the intercultural exploration (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999). With the intercultural approach, L2 learners no longer play passive roles instead they become active participants in classroom-based context (Song, 2004).

4.2 Discussion on Intercultural Factor in Pedagogical Context

The pedagogical implication of intercultural aspect should be noted on its feasibility, effectiveness and relevant reflection.

As it is mentioned before, intercultural language teaching seeks to foster learners' intercultural competence and linguistic competence, meanwhile, it helps them to understand individuals from diverse cultures and enrich their learning experience via mutual interactions (Byram. et al, 2002). In intercultural approach, the ESL/EFL teachers act as supporters who guide learners to understand their own culture as well as others' cultures, and they are also required to be learners of culture and know how to judge cultural element (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999). Therefore, Corbett (2003) notes that in early phase of language teaching, teachers are responsible for designing tasks to show how they demonstrate, evaluate and explore cultural behaviors. In the subsequent phase, he suggests that teacher needs to be aware of their role of being a guide and facilitator as it can promote learners' confidence and independence. In intercultural classrooms, teachers are able to implement information-gap activities, which involve information exchange (e.g., pictures for oral description), knowledge construction (e.g., jig-saw reading and listening) and expression of personal ideas (e.g., favorite films), and by engaging in these activities, it may be beneficial to increase the students' language fluency as well as their consciousness of culture (Corbett, 2003).

However, other factors in intercultural language teaching need to be taken into consideration. Educational syllabus, teaching resources and teaching methodologies should be intercultural-oriented (Song, 2004). For syllabus, “native-speaker model” needs de-concentration, moreover, culture about L1 and L2 should be included in content-focused curriculum, which enable learners to know their linguaculture and identities. The resources used in class should demonstrate the position of English as a global language for the purpose of interaction between L1 and L2 speakers. The adoption of instruction aims to develop students’ critical cultural awareness and their capacity of multicultural communications. Similarly, the intercultural learning context should facilitate authentic communication for helping learners to have a better understanding of using language in multiple settings. More importantly, teachers have obligation to impart knowledge of culture through language teaching (Kramsch, 1998).

5. Conclusion

To summarize, ESL/EFL teachers are confronted with challenges from the autonomous learning, CLT and ILL/ILT. For autonomy learning, it refers to an ability to control learning progress. In classroom settings, teachers are required to encourage learners to cultivate their autonomy in collaborative work and teachers can offer the instruction when necessary. For the CLT, it advocates the meaningful communication in language teaching, furthermore, it requires teachers to create authentic context for students for effective language production. For the ILL/ILT, it relates to have access to cultures via language learning or teaching, however, it requires the involvement of intercultural environment, which promotes the development of learners’ intercultural competence.

Faced with these challenges, ESL/EFL teachers should strike a balance between the choices of teaching approaches and integrate these three dimensions with their teaching experience and students’ learning contexts.

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