

Peer Teaching in College English Classes: An Action Research to Promote Learner Autonomy

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Supported by Research Project of Shanghai University of Engineering Science (y201718002).

Received 18 December 2016; accepted 2 February 2017
Published online 26 February 2017

Abstract

This paper reports an action research in college English classes by the use of peer teaching to promote learner autonomy. Questionnaire, classroom observation, group interviews and written journals were used to explore students' readiness for autonomy, the effectiveness of peer teaching in promoting autonomy as well as the challenges of peer teaching. The initial cycle of the action research suggests peer teaching is an effective strategy for autonomy in that student teachers have taken more responsibilities for their learning and the whole class have more engagement in the class. However, there are also challenges involved, which offer valuable insight into the planning and action of coming cycles.

Key words: Peer teaching; Action research; Learner autonomy; Language learning beliefs

Gu, J. (2017). Peer Teaching in College English Classes: An Action Research to Promote Learner Autonomy. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 13(2), 16-20. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/9442>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/9442>

INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy has been a topic under heated discussion in Chinese college English teaching since the beginning of the century. Issued by the Ministry of Education in 2004 for trial implementation, *College*

English Curriculum Requirements promoted the reform of college English teaching model — from being teacher-centered to learner-centered. “An important indicator of the successful reform of the teaching model is the development of individualized study methods and the autonomous learning ability on the part of students” (p.33). As a result, the last ten years have witnessed a boom in research on promoting learner autonomy in college English teaching and learning across China.

Learner autonomy is no doubt a worthy concept for language teaching and learning. Yet as a practicing teacher, I feel the challenges and problems in promoting it. For example, most students' past learning experiences in elementary and secondary schools were exam-oriented and didn't encourage autonomy. Instead of taking charge of their own learning, they prefer being fed the “knowledge” because they are used to it. Teachers are often trapped in a vicious circle with inactive students: students have no initiative, so teachers have to take control; the more teachers take control, the less students take the initiative in their own learning. So again, teaching falls back to the traditional teacher-centered style.

Obviously, there is a wide gap between intentions and reality. Just as Burns (2010) writes, “as teachers, we often see gaps between what is actually happening in our teaching situation and what we would ideally like to see happening” (p.2). In view of this, this paper reports an action research of the author in college English classes by the use of peer teaching to promote learner autonomy.

1. BASIC ISSUES OF THE STUDY

1.1 Action Research

1.1.1 What Is Action Research

Richards & Lockhart (1996) summarizes action research (AR) as “teacher-initiated classroom investigation which seeks to increase the teacher's understanding of classroom

teaching and learning, and to bring about change in classroom practices” (p.16). According to Burns (2010), the central idea of AR is to intervene in a deliberate way in the problematic situation in order to bring about changes and improvements in practice.

1.1.2 Steps in Action Research

Action research typically involves four phases in a cycle of research, namely plan, act, observe and reflect (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). It is probably the best-known model of AR and is sort of “classic” (Burns, 2010, p.8). Based on this model, Richards & Lockhart (1996) proposes specific procedures in conducting AR. For example, the teacher:

- a) Selects an issue or concern to examine in more detail.
- b) Selects a suitable procedure for collecting information about the topic.
- c) Collects the information, analyzes it, and decides what changes might be necessary.
- d) Develops an action plan to help bring about the change in classroom observation behavior.
- e) Observes the effects of the action plan on teaching behavior and reflects on its significance.
- f) Initiates a second action cycle, if necessary (pp.12-13).

1.2 Peer Teaching and Learner Autonomy

According to Boud, Cohen and Sampson (2001), peer teaching involves students learning from and with each other in ways that are “mutually beneficial and involve sharing knowledge, ideas and experience between participants” (p.3). Drawing on an abundance of research, Benson & Ying (2013) suggests peer teaching as a pedagogical strategy for autonomy in that it enhances autonomy by “shifting the locus of control in instruction from the teacher to the students” (p.51).

1.3 My Teaching Context

I teach College English, Integrated Course, in a university in Shanghai, China. Integrated Course is supposed to integrate the basic skills of language learning—listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. However, in practice, it is primarily a reading course, which deals with vocabulary, grammar, learning strategies, cultural background, etc..

My students come from all parts of China, whose English learning experiences and levels are much varied. Since my university is technology and engineering-oriented, most of my students major in technology and engineering-related disciplines, and their English level is often below intermediate. Integrated Course is a compulsory course in my university, but unfortunately many students are poorly motivated in learning English.

There is a well-known Chinese proverb: Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. In my teaching practice, I often see students who are reluctant to brave the sea

and learn to catch the fish, even though it’s a skill and ability which may be rewarding for the whole of their life. Instead, they expect teachers to give them the fish because it’s easier and they are used to it.

So that is the context of my action research. I made reflective and critical investigation of my teaching as well as my students’ learning in my college English classes with the aim of bringing about changes and improvements in my practice. I employed peer teaching as a pedagogical strategy to enhance students’ engagement in the learning process, encourage collaborative learning, enrich classroom tasks, and promote learner autonomy.

2. ACTION RESEARCH

This study follows the procedures of AR adapted from Richards & Lockhart (1996), which is discussed in 1.1.2.

2.1 Selecting an Issue

Though learner autonomy has been advocated in Chinese college English teaching for more than ten years, students’ readiness for autonomy and their ability in conducting autonomous learning is far from what is discussed by the autonomy literature: being able to manage, direct, regulate and guide their learning, i.e. ability in planning, monitoring and evaluating.

Hence, I wanted to find out ways to promote learner autonomy in my classes. The study focuses on three research questions:

- a) What language learning beliefs do my students have? Do these beliefs enhance or impede the development of their potential for autonomy?
- b) Is peer teaching an effective strategy for autonomy?
- c) What are the challenges of peer teaching?

2.2 Collecting Information

To answer the research question (a), I developed a questionnaire of Likert five-point scale, probing into a variety of beliefs about language learning that may reflect the nature of autonomous learning behaviors. The questionnaire items were generated from a number of resources. Some were borrowed from established questionnaires like Horwitz (1987), Cotterall (1995, 1999); others were generated from my experience as a language teacher, my students’ written reflections as language learners, as well as our talks and brainstorming about learner autonomy. A pilot study of 15 students was conducted so as to find out any possible ambiguous wording or misunderstanding between what I intended to express and what students could actually understand. Afterwards, improvements were made on certain items.

The questionnaire was then administered in my regular classes. Students were informed of the purpose of the questionnaire and were asked to respond to the items according to their honest opinions. Afterwards, 10 students were randomly chosen for semi-structured

individual interviews to add a qualitative research support to the questionnaire probe. Information was also collected by means of classroom observation to see whether there is any incompatibility between students' language learning beliefs and their actual learning behaviors.

2.3 Analyzing the Information

Students' responses to the questionnaire were input into the computer and analyzed descriptively by calculating the mean score and SD in order to determine what trends the data suggest about learners' potential for autonomy.

2.4 Developing an Action Plan

I chose a text— "A Virtual Life" (Text A, Unit 4, Book 2, Integrated Course)—in our textbook as the teaching material for the peer teaching tasks. It was chosen because the topic was relevant to students' daily life and not difficult to them. As my class was a large class with 70

students and many of the students were not competent enough in speaking English in front of the class, not the whole class was expected to take part in the initial trial. Instead, the idea of peer teaching was explicitly addressed to the class and volunteers were recruited. At last, 18 students divided into three teams participated in the initial cycle of peer teaching, with Team A (5) focusing on Pre-reading tasks, Team B (8) focusing on While-reading tasks and Team C (5) focusing on Post-reading tasks. The students were given two weeks to develop their teaching plan and were encouraged to discuss with me whenever problems or confusion arose. All the student teachers participated in the discussion sessions to develop the teaching plan, and 2 or 3 of each team at last acted as teachers on behalf of their team to give the class their lessons. The teaching plan is listed in the following table.

Table 1
Teaching Plan

Stage	Pre-reading	While-reading	Post-reading
Time allotment	45 min (1 period)	90 min (2 periods)	45 min (1 period)
Objectives	Know background information about the Internet.	Understand the main idea, organization and key words of the text.	Offer critical thinking about Internet-related topics.
Content	Background information	The text	Theme-related topics
Tasks	Task 1: (Oral presentation) A brief introduction to the Internet and the Internet-related vocabulary; Task 2: (Oral presentation and class discussion) Three of my favorite websites/APPs	Task 1: Strategy-based instruction— advance organization, selective attention, summarizing — to understand the main idea and organization of the text; Task 2: Strategy-based instruction— inferencing, resourcing, elaboration— to understand the new words and key points in the text; Task 3: Class discussion about the arguments in the text	Task 1: (Oral presentation) Is the Internet a blessing or a curse? Task 2: (Oral presentation) Is virtual life better than reality? Task 3: (Class discussion) Changes in our lifestyle brought about by the Internet

2.5 Observation and Reflection

The effects of peer teaching was evaluated by the following ways:

- Video recording of the four periods of peer teaching
- Classroom observation. Both the teacher and the students completed a form, evaluating the effectiveness of peer teaching
- Two group interviews with the student teachers
- Written journals of the whole class

The two group interviews with the student teachers were conducted in Chinese, and the written journals were written in either Chinese or English according to students' personal preference. I translated the Chinese into English for presentation in this article.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion are organized according to the three research questions.

3.1 Students' Language Learning Beliefs

The questionnaire statistics show students display a degree of readiness for autonomy. For example, 87% of the students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I myself should be responsible for my English learning" ($M=4.12$). However, when it comes to specific autonomous learning behaviors like goal-setting and monitoring, the picture is not so encouraging. For example, students prefer to follow teacher's instructions passively, seldom bother to reflect on their learning progress, have only vague ideas about learning strategies, especially the metacognitive ones.

In the follow-up interviews, students admit they knew the metacognitive items were of vital importance to their language learning, but they did not know much about the nature of metacognitive strategies since they "have never been taught about them in high schools". Therefore, they would like the teacher to offer them help in these areas because "teachers have the expertise in language learning".

In short, despite their general endorsement of learner responsibility, it seems students are either unwilling or

incompetent to carry out specific autonomous learning behaviors—sometimes, they have no idea about why they should do so, and on other occasions they possess no skills and abilities to do so. All these point to the necessity of learner training. Surely, there are many ways of learner training, and in the present study, I used peer teaching as a way of learner training for autonomy, observing its effectiveness in promoting autonomy as well as the benefits and challenges involved in it.

3.2 The Effectiveness of Peer Teaching as a Strategy for Autonomy

Overall, peer teaching seemed to be an effective strategy for autonomy. First, it enhanced students' motivation and actively involved them in the learning process. As I was invited to join some of their discussion sessions, I observed a higher level of student engagement than usual. Likewise, in the four periods of peer teaching, my observation suggested that the whole class was much more attentive than before and showed an interest in what their classmates were talking. Group interviews and written journals suggested peer teaching was evidently new to the students so that they conducted it with curiosity and expectations. For example,

It's interesting, so I wanted to have a try. (Group interview)

I always dreamed of being a teacher when I was a child. This peer teaching task gives me an opportunity to act as a teacher, and I feel a sense of honor. I think I should have good preparation to make it. (Written journal)

It's interesting to see my good friend to act as a teacher. I want to find whether he can teach well. (Written journal)

Second, in carrying out the peer teaching tasks, the student teachers have to use a variety of learning strategies, metacognitive ones like formulating learning objectives, organizational planning, monitoring and evaluation, cognitive ones like resourcing, summarizing, transfer, elaboration, inferencing, as well as social/affective strategies like cooperation. Being able to use these strategies, especially the metacognitive ones, are widely recognized by the autonomy literature as central characteristics of autonomous learners. In a sense, peer teaching is a task-based learner training program towards autonomy:

In teaching my classmates, I came to understand the learning strategies better. In the past, when the teacher talked about strategies, the metacognitive strategies, the cognitive strategies, I always thought they were only big names which had no real effect on my English study. However, this experience of acting as a teacher has changed my mind. As the saying goes, a good beginning is half the battle, a good lesson should have a good teaching plan. So that's the strategy of planning, isn't it? (Written journal)

3.3 Challenges of Peer Teaching

The initial trial of peer teaching in my classes has proved successful. It seems to be an effective strategy for autonomy, yet there are also challenges involved. First, the effect of peer teaching depends, to a large extent, on the students' English level of proficiency. Only 18 out of 70 students volunteered in peer teaching. It seemed the majority of the students were only happy to be the audience. In their journals, many students expressed their anxiety about speaking in front of the class:

My English is so poor that I can't manage the teaching tasks. (Written journal)

I think only those who are good at English can do it. (Written journal)

If peer teaching is effective in promoting autonomy, it has an effect only on those student teachers who participated in the teaching tasks. As for the "audience", their degree of autonomy has remained much the same as before.

Second, how long can peer teaching sustain students' interest and enthusiasm? Obviously, one reason students were interested in it was because it's new to them. As a trial of only four periods, it was effective. Yet if it is stretched into the whole term, can student teachers sustain their efforts in peer teaching and can the "audience" have the same interest in it?

Third, the quality of peer teaching is another concern. Though the majority of the students offered positive responses to peer teaching, several students expressed their dissatisfaction.

Peer teaching is interesting and fun, but I don't learn. What my classmates teach is something I've already known. (Written journal)

I found many mistakes in what my classmates taught. I think the teacher is better. (Written journal)

To be honest, these problems are real. The quality of teaching of different "teachers" varied so that in the following classes, I had to do certain "remedial teaching" to cover the "important" points that what I thought were omitted by the student teachers. In doing this, a unit may consume more time than before. Thus, another problem arises—how to keep up with the teaching schedule?

CONCLUSION

In this study, I reported an action research to promote learner autonomy in my classes by the use of peer teaching. Overall, the initial trial of four periods seems a success in that student teachers have taken more responsibilities for their learning and the whole class have more involvement in the lesson. It seems peer teaching is an effective strategy for autonomy. Yet there are also many challenges. For example, how to involve more students in the teaching tasks in large classes often with 60-70 students? How to sustain students' interest and

efforts in peer teaching? How to raise the teaching quality of student teachers? As Burns (2010) note, action research is of “iterative or recursive nature” whose cycles are successive and open (p.8). These problems that arose in the initial trial offer valuable insight into the planning and action of coming cycles.

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