

Teacher's Role in Students-Centered English Intensive Reading Class in China

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Abstract

Inspired by the theory of Constructivism, the notions of learner diversity and learner choice get a lot of awareness and recognition of many educators, therefore more and more emphasis has been placed on the position of students in the classroom. As a consequence, the traditional teacher-centered foreign language teaching pattern has been supplanted by a new students-centered pattern by which students are the main body of the class and the owner of their learning. However, teachers' role in students-centered foreign language teaching class should not be neglected. In intensive reading class, which is a course to cultivate the students' comprehensive abilities of language, the roles of the teacher, instead of as a controller and a dominant, should be played fully as a manager and an organizer of the language teaching class, a designer of the teaching process, a source of teaching material, an investigator and a counselor of students' learning and a promoter of deepening and confirming the accepted knowledge.

Key words: Teacher's role; Students-centered; Foreign language teaching; Intensive reading

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INTRODUCTION

Constructivism is a psychological theory which argues that the knowledge of the human being is *constructed*,

that humans generate knowledge and meaning on the basis of previous experiences. This theory was developed by Jean Piaget in 1960s as a branch of cognitive psychology. Constructivists think that learners should get their knowledge not through what has been taught by teachers, but through their own active learning, exploring, discovering and constructing. Effective learning happens when they take stock of what they already know and then move beyond it (Glaserfeld, 1989). Although this theory is not a particular pedagogy, it is closely associated with the pedagogical approaches. Therefore it has been widely accepted in educational circle. The theory pays emphasis on the students' position in the class, which stresses that students should be the center of the teaching-learning process.

In recent years, this theory has a great impact on foreign language teaching, which has resulted in a shift of teaching pattern from teacher-centered class to a students-centered class, hence a shift of a teacher's role from a ruler and a dominator to an advisor and a facilitator.

1. THE DISADVANTAGES OF TRADITIONAL TEACHER-CENTERED FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

For decades, foreign language teaching in China has been greatly influenced by Grammar-Translation Approach and Audio-Lingual Approach. In Grammar-Translation Approach, much effort is paid to the teacher's teaching process of training of the students' ability of reading and writing while their ability of listening and speaking has been neglected. Whereas in Audio-Lingual Approach, although listening and speaking are much emphasized, it is still a method with which teachers occupy most of the class time.

In traditional language teaching pattern, most class time is spent with the teacher lecturing and the students

watching and listening. The students work individually on assignments, and cooperation is discouraged, even not allowed. Teachers are dominant in the process of teaching. According to Richards and Rodgers (1986), the teacher acts as “the pattern of language, the lesson planner, the controller of learner practice and the assessor of learner’s performance”. Teachers plan the course, prepare the materials, decide what and how learners ought to learn, organize the teaching process and assess the students’ knowledge and performance. In this situation, the teachers are definitely the center of teaching. They pass the knowledge which they get directly from books on to the students, playing a role of an authority and knowledge-giver. They do not enable the students to explore more and more knowledge by themselves, but induce cramming, paying little attention to the feelings and reactions of the students.

While in such a traditional classroom, the students are recipient of knowledge. They have to follow the teacher passively and accept mechanically what is taught by teachers regardless of whether they are interested in it or not. While students are passive receivers of knowledge who had few opportunities to apply what they have learnt to practical communication, the initiative and creativity of the students cannot be brought into full play.

It is obvious that traditional foreign language teaching in China was mainly teacher-centered, examination-oriented, and grammar-and-vocabulary-based. Emphasis was laid on teaching instead of learning. This will naturally lead to poor teacher-student interactive relation and unsatisfactory effect of language teaching. Owing to the teacher’s role in a traditional language teaching, learners become more and more frustrated in learning and their performance is less and less efficient.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the traditional teaching methods have “crippled” the students. Even if they have passed CET 4 and CET 6, many of them “who meet native speakers still find themselves unprepared for the variety of accents” (Cortazze & Jin, 1996) and lack communicative ability in spite of their ability to memorize thousands of words, to analyze sentence structures, to read moderately difficult articles and make correct choice in reading comprehension exercises. Therefore it is necessary to call for an innovation of foreign language teaching.

2. THE ADVANTAGES OF STUDENTS-CENTERED FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

In contrast, a student-centered class is a kind of new active class, resulting from the quality-oriented education system. According to the definition given by McCombs and Whisler (1997), “student-centered” is “the perspective that joins a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests,

capacities and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation).”

According to Moffett and Wagner (1992), in a student-centered classroom learners must have three things for learning—individualization, interaction, and integration. Under this teaching pattern, the students are the main body of knowledge receiving and processing, the active constructors of knowledge and meaning. Textbook is not the sole object students aim at and teacher’s instruction is not the only way for the students to get the knowledge. Quite different from the teacher-centered language teaching class in which teacher acts as an actor while the students are spectators and viewers, the main characteristic of students-centered language teaching class is that the teacher and students are all actors, students can get more knowledge both from their active exploring outside the classroom and cooperation and communication with other students in the context created by the teacher and all the students are actively involved in the classroom activities. They are placed at the center of teaching process. The teacher tries to promote students’ efficiency, skills in using language to the maximum by urging students to join him in the learning process. Language teaching becomes more effective when teaching program is made much more caring for the interest, the needs, the characteristics and the expectations of students and if students are encouraged to play an active role in their learning process. Students always find it a pleasure to sit in class, asking questions, discussing or even arguing with the teacher and the classmates. Students will learn best by trying to take charge of their learning on their own. They take up primary responsibility for their choices and have opportunities to exercise and control over their learning, and therefore their potential initiative and creativity can be developed to a comparatively higher degree.

3. TEACHER’S ROLE IN STUDENTS-CENTERED FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING CLASS

The students-centered foreign language teaching pattern seems better, but the previous researches in this field also have their loopholes. That is, with the impact of Cognitive Theory and Constructivism, too much emphasis has been laid on the study of students’ position and the characteristics of language learners than to those of a good language teacher, which might lead to the tendency that the teacher’s role will be neglected. Actually, along with the shift of teaching pattern from teacher-centered to students-centered, the requirements on the teacher are greater, paradoxically, not less. teacher’s function becomes less dominant than before, but not less important, and the role of the teacher should be emphasized instead of being

neglected. According to Widdowson (1987), "The increase in learner-centered activity and collaborative work in the classroom does not mean that the teacher becomes less authoritative. He or she still has to contrive the required enabling conditions for learning, has still to monitor and guide progress. And all this presupposes and expertise, applied perhaps with more subtlety and consideration and discretion than before, but applied nonetheless."

Consequently, as a foreign language teacher, we should try to make up the loophole by putting forward the teachers' new role in student-centered foreign language classroom to promote the theoretical study and actual classroom teaching to a higher level.

4. TEACHER'S ROLE IN STUDENTS-CENTERED INTENSIVE READING CLASS

In foreign language teaching in China, intensive reading class has been an essential language course which has a wide concern of phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and discourse. In intensive reading class, an synthetic and systematical approach is used for the development of communicative skills in the classroom, in which the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the acquisition of a foreign language can be trained in a coherent way, and practiced together, with a distinction of the importance of one upon the other. Its general objective is to make students have a fairly strong ability for reading and a specific ability for listening, speaking and writing. In addition, the intensive reading course is aimed at widening their horizon and opening their mind, depending their understanding of the world, getting a better knowledge of foreign culture for reference, and improving their cultural ability. Therefore, intensive reading course is believed to be of great help for students to master the English language and culture and communicate with the people from different countries.

In traditional foreign language class, all these four ability are trained discretely. Language teaching is separated from content teaching. In a typical intensive reading class, on account of approaching the reading material under the close guidance of the teacher, students are forced to pay great attention to the reading material, and reading is highlighted, the mastery of a large body of vocabulary and grammar is seen as the key to successful learning of foreign language. The teacher, therefore, makes great effort to introduce more words and explain difficult grammatical rules to the students, which occupies most of the time of class. Then the teacher analyses and translates the text sentence by sentence expecting the students get a better understanding of the text, hence the improvement of the reading ability. In the whole teaching process, students' listening and speaking ability are only trained by their listening to the tape recording of the text and reading the text aloud. All the time, the teacher

is transmitting the knowledge to the students, which make the students have little time to practice, assimilate and absorb. This kind of teaching focuses on linguistic competence rather than communicative competence and emphasizes language knowledge but neglects language skills. As a result, students see their roles as passive ones. They may make grammatically correct sentences but fail to perform in simple communication.

Obviously, teacher's role as a transmitter of knowledge in traditional teaching can hardly satisfy the demands for the teachers of intensive reading class these days. The teaching objectives of intensive reading course to cultivate the integrated skills of students and the move of teaching pattern from teacher-centered class to students-centered class have caused a great challenge to the traditional teaching and teacher's role. Instead of controlling and giving lectures all the class, now the teacher gets involved into the class to monitor, clarify, guide, question, discipline, motivate, and encourage, etc. (Harmer, 1991). As a teacher of intensive reading course, we should reexamine and reset the role we play in the teaching. As suggested by Littlewood (1981), a good teacher should be a counselor, participant, facilitator and monitor. Taking the previous research into consideration, linking up the characteristics of intensive reading course and the author's practical teaching experience, this paper expects that the teacher play the following roles in student-centered intensive reading class:

4.1 As a Manager and Organizer

Woolfolk (2001) offers at least three reasons why Classroom Management is important in a student-centered classroom: to allocate more time for learning, to give more access to learning, and to help students develop their self-management. By playing a role as a manager, the teacher can manage time and balance the allocation of time for different skills, focus the teaching priorities and difficult points, set goals for students in each class, ask the students to make their own choices and fulfill the task without interference, to reconcile differences and disputes and develop harmonious atmosphere in the classroom. As a manager and an organizer, the teacher should manage and organize the teaching process in a more effective way. In students-centered intensive reading classroom, innovations in teaching aim at involving students' active participation in classroom activities, such as pair work, group work and role-play and consolidating and expanding their knowledge from the textbooks and facilitating the further learning. This includes planning the teaching program in advance, controlling the teaching process and assigning homework for the students. The teacher should make sure that all students in the classroom work productively and exert their effort to the maximum level by encouraging and prompting them until they produce the answer, instead of telling them what it is.

4.2 As a Designer

Being a designer, the teacher should try all means to create a relaxed but not loose atmosphere in which the students are treated as equals to the teacher. This atmosphere not only encourages students' interaction with the teacher as well as with other students, but also removes the distance between the teacher and the students, which may contribute positively to the students' participation in the classroom activities and thus makes it possible to carry out the classroom activities effectively. Moreover, as a designer, the teacher also takes the responsibility to choose suitable supplementary materials for the teaching, create appropriate classroom activities in line with the textbook and put forward proper questions for students to discuss to develop the required skills.

Questions and activities in classroom ought to be constructive and cheerful experience, in which the learners' opinion and ideas are elicited, respected, their interests stimulated, and their minds challenged. A good design may make the class more interesting and meaningful and may lead to unexpected effect.

4.3 As a Source

The teacher should provide information and assistance as needed. Nowadays, we live in an age of information explosion in which all kinds of information floods in to the newspaper, magazines and computers. We can find the information we want easily. It is teacher's job to find good and valuable materials for the students which are well adapted to the students' capacities. As has been mentioned above, the intensive reading course is to cultivate the comprehensive ability of using a foreign language including cultural communicative ability, so besides other abilities, it is of greater importance to know the culture of the target language so as to avoid the phenomenon of "Chinglish" and misunderstanding when communicating with foreigners. As a teacher of intensive reading class, we should tell the essence from the dross, impart the necessary inter-cultural knowledge to the students in time to arouse their interest and make sure of the correct use of that language.

4.4 As an Investigator and a Counselor

The teacher should be an investigator and analyst of students. As intensive reading course is one of the most important courses for college students, every week, they spend more hours in intensive reading class than in other classes. So it is necessary to inquire students' needs and interest in language learning and different personality which may affect their language learning. The teacher should have adequate knowledge about students, their goals, motivation, learning strategies and should try to find out what students can do and can not do, and work out a program aimed at giving them the skills they need and organize various kinds of classroom activities in response to different types of students' personality and different learning psychology.

In addition, the teacher should observe the students and their learning at all times in order to identify the problems and offer some help to the students in time. On the one hand, the teacher should help to reduce the students' affective filters in the intensive reading class. When some students suffer from great anxiety, they may be afraid of making mistakes and therefore they will retreat from answering the teacher's questions or discussing with their classmates. This is especially harmful in an intensive reading class, in which all skills of language learning are trained. As a counselor, the teacher should create a relaxed surrounding to make the students feel easy and comfortable, give the lessons in a very kind manner; try to encourage the anxious students, give them some clues in a proper time and have heart-to-heart talks with them if necessary. On the other hand, the teacher should help the students improve their learning by discovering the difficulties standing in their learning process and introducing them proper and efficient learning strategies of all skills and some useful learning methods. The teacher should make sure that everyone in the classroom improves steadily in accordance with his own capabilities.

4.5 As a Promoter

As an integrative course, intensive reading sets its aim to nourish the comprehensive abilities of language. Therefore teacher's main task after class is to promote the students' use of what they have learned. As a promoter of , the teacher should not only urge the students to take in the knowledge from the textbook but also inspire them to make full use of what has been learned in the class into practice. This promotion of language knowledge may lead to the consolidation of the textbook knowledge and the full play of students' creativity. Furthermore, the teacher may assign the students some tasks of reading materials, listening to some news and recordings, discussing with the classmates or writing compositions which are related to the textbooks serving as an important supplement. By doing these, on the one hand, students' abilities including listening, speaking, reading and writing may be promoted, on the other hand, the students' initiative and active exploring spirit are developed. In addition, the application of knowledge into practice is of great significance in our daily life, which is compatible with the demands of the modern society on the graduates

CONCLUSION

According to *Chinese College English Curriculum Requirements* (2007), a shift in teaching pattern refers to a shift from teacher-centered teaching idea and teaching practice which takes the teaching of language knowledge and language skill as the sole task to students-centered teaching idea and teaching practice which places emphasis both on the teaching of language knowledge and language skill and on the improving of language proficiency and learning autonomy.

As English teachers, we should face bravely the impact and challenge of education reform both in China and the world and be fully aware of necessity and pressure of innovation on the present foreign language teaching, adjust our roles in language teaching class timely to the new student-centered teaching pattern. Only by continuous study, imploration and practice, can we enrich our knowledge, improve our teaching techniques and become an efficient foreign language teacher.

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