

Promoting Autonomous, Collaborative English learning Practices and Fostering Greater Learner Autonomy among Secondary Students in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT—*Learner autonomy can be referred as an individual’s ability and responsibility to take charge of his or her own learning, which is important to language learning. In Hong Kong, English is more like a foreign language. It is considered as the high variety and speaking the language in a non-required situation is always associated with a negative connotation of being arrogant. To most local people, it is a language learned in a classroom and is seldom used for communicative purposes. Meanwhile, Hong Kong classrooms are featured with teacher-centred, examination-oriented teaching, and passive learning. These factors make the taking up of chances of practising the language with Cantonese-speaking peers in outside of class situations and the development of learner autonomy very difficult. However, out-of-class learning is essential to language learning and learner autonomy. In this multiple-case study, the case participants were asked to reveal their approaches to overcoming challenges, engaging in collaborative English learning practices, and developing greater autonomy. In this paper, their ways to tackle the difficulties of participating in out-of-class English practices with peers and develop learner autonomy, will be discussed.*

Keywords— Learner autonomy, out-of-class learning, collaborative learning, second language acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Learner Autonomy and Out-of-class Learning

Learner autonomy, defined by Holec (1981), refers to a learner’s ability and responsibility to decide the aims of learning and their content, choose the methods to learn, monitor the learning process, and evaluate their learning outcome. Being able to reflect and act independently is also the key of learner autonomy (Little, 1991). Learner autonomy, thus, is important to language learning (Benson, 2011b). While out-of-class learning can strengthen autonomy (Benson, 2011b), encourage personalized practices (Murray & Kojima, 2007), and improve their language proficiency (Norton & Toohey, 2001), many schools include out-of-class learning e.g. after school practices, extra-curricular activities, as part of the structured syllabus or required activities (Benson, 2011a).

1.2 The Role of English in Hong Kong and EFL Learning Environment in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, more than 90% of the population are Cantonese-speakers (Li, 2017). As a global and colonial language, English is a prestigious language with linguistic capital for social and educational success (Bourdieu, 1991; Chik & Bredbach, 2011). Social sanctions with negative connotation, for example, being arrogant, exist. As a highly marked variety, English is used only when required (e.g. study or work) or with a legitimate reason, for example, the presence of a non-Cantonese speaker, or inter-ethnic communication. The language is not generally used for communicative purposes. Hongkongers always use code-mix, instead of English, in daily conversations (Li, 2011, 2017). Although English is a compulsory subject in all levels of education and a major medium of instruction in most secondary schools and universities in Hong Kong, the English ability of locally-educated Hongkongers are varied depending on their education and family background (Chik, 2011).

Most local secondary school students gain their English input solely from English classes and their English teachers (Berry & McNeill, 2005). To narrow gap between the use of the language in the classroom and for communicative purpose, the government and local secondary schools always promote independent learning and encourage students to use the language with their peers outside of class (Curriculum Development Institute, 2004), through which students can gain more personalized practices (Murray & Kojima, 2007) and strengthen learner autonomy (Benson, 2011b). From social learning perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), students can cultivate their linguistic, cognitive, and affective skills through collaborative

learning, in which students can design, monitor, evaluate their group learning tasks and open up more learning opportunities for themselves and for other learners. In turn, collaborative learning also promotes learner autonomy (Beseghi, 2017; Jacobs & Tan, 2015).

However, Hong Kong language classrooms feature with examination-oriented, teacher-centered and grammar-focused practices, student passivity and strong extrinsic motivation. The institutional constraints, together with the cultural perception, have made the development of learner autonomy and communicative use of the language among peers very difficult (Evans, 2008; Hyland, 2004). Most local secondary students did not consider themselves being able and responsible for their own learning (Miller, 2009).

In this paper, the two research questions will be discussed: (1) How and why did the case participants overcome the barriers and practise the language with their peers outside of class? (2) How was their learner autonomy fostered? The study found that the case participants also shared the social and institutional constraints when practising the language. However, they were able to overcome the barriers by taking advantage of their instrumental motives, negotiating self-identities, and building peer support. Through the out-of-class practices, they gained independent learning experiences and control of their own learning processes, eventually fostering their learner autonomy. In the last section, suggestion on how teachers can help students gain more in peer-based activities and develop learner autonomy will be given.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Good language learners usually engage more in out-of-class learning (Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1996) and they are the target group of the present qualitative multiple-case study (see Chan, 2012). Through a survey and two semi-structured interviews, the six case participants, who were highly proficient learners of English, reflected on their language practices with their peers and autonomous learning during secondary education. A thematic approach was used to code and analyze the data (Hood, 2009; Pavlenko, 2007).

2.2 Profiles of the Case Participants

The six participants, Ada, Carl, Elsa, Jo, Mandy, and Terry (pseudonyms) were locally educated, Hong Kong born, native Cantonese speakers. They all scored Grade B (or, Level 5) or above in the English language examination in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and in the Use of English (UE) examination in Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE), which were two university entrance examinations in the territory. They all attended English-medium secondary schools, which were regarded as elite schools because only 25 percent of the government-aided or government secondary schools were taught in English (Cheng, 2009). At the time of the data collection, they were in their second year of an undergraduate programme in the university.

In the following sections how and why the case participants joined peer-based learning and how they developed learner autonomy through peer interactions will be discussed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At secondary school, the case participants, like most secondary school students, used English with their peers mainly in required situations, for example, assignment, teacher-assigned activities. This paper mainly focuses on Carl, Elsa, and Ada who used English with their peers outside of class to strengthen their English skills.

3.1 Out-of-class Peer-based Learning in English: Constraints

All case participants, similar to other secondary school students, were reluctant to use English with their classmates outside the classroom because of the cultural factors mentioned, for example, fear of being labelled and isolated, even though using English among peers was strongly recommended in English-medium secondary schools.

Reflecting on their daily use of English with their peers, Mandy and Terry, disclosed that they rarely used the target language with their classmates. After listening to the question about using English among peers in non-required situations, Terry even replied with a surprising laughter with a remark, “Absolutely not. Haha! Absolutely not.” His reaction revealed that using English among peers was an absurd behaviour.

In the questionnaire, Carl referred using English with classmates as “abnormal.” He further explained in this way:

The school I studied at was a very traditional and conservative one. A classmate who spoke English at school would be treated as weird. Especially we were boys and our English was not very good. They might ask, “What are you talking about?”

[...] I thought that girls' English ability should be better. And in a boys' school, boys didn't get in touch with English too often. Boys thought it was embarrassing to speak English and boys didn't perform better than girls so, the result was that the boys' English was poorer than girls. (Carl, interview 1)

Since primary school, Carl received schooling in a boys' school. Possessing a traditional perspective towards the relationship between gender and language ability, he believed that females were more capable of mastering a language (Yang, 2011). He attached gender difference to the lower English ability among his classmates. However, he added in the interview that the cultural factors in his school might contribute more to the overall weakness in English, for example, the institutional orientation favourable towards Mathematics and Science subjects in his school and the negative connotation (e.g. showing off) when using English among his peers. These obstacles are also commonly observed in local secondary schools (Tong, 2010). In fact, the constraints are less likely a gender problem.

3.2 Opportunities: Instrumental Reasons, Negotiation of Self-identities, Peer Support

However, the case participants saw the need for more practices because of instrumental reasons: to gain better grades and to tackle public examinations. Carl, Elsa, and Ada started to use English with their peers. Carl used English with his best friend and Elsa actively invited her friends to join a debate activity.

Although Carl and Elsa scored high in English subject examinations and regarded themselves as proficient English learners, they also faced similar obstacles, such as, fear of being isolated and labelled as arrogant, when using English with peers outside of class. Their self-identities were associated with their English subject results, which helped them overcome the obstacles. To gain the right to speak English with their peers, they actively asserted an identity for themselves:

I tackled this (the negative connotation against using English among classmates) by showing to others that I did achieve good results in exams. Then, why can't I speak English? If you didn't do well in English, people might challenge you by asking what you were talking about. Then I didn't care what others thought about me. (Carl, interview 1)

I wanted to keep my good grade in English (she scored an A in the HKCEE). This was my best subject and the only one I did well in. I could only rely on my English. I thought that it was the good grade in English that would get me into university; otherwise, I could not study at university. I could not rely on any other subjects except English! I could only rely on English! (Elsa, interview 1)

After getting a good grade (grade B) in the first public examination, Carl regarded himself as a proficient English learner and it was legitimate for him to speak in English among his classmates who were weaker than him in the language (Lin, 2008; Norton, 2000).

Later, in secondary 6, he made a friend who was good at English too. Peer support enabled him to have more power to face the social sanction of using English in front of other classmates: "Others found us speaking English funny. We just ignored them and continued to speak English again." To prepare for the coming university entrance examination, they seized the opportunities to use English for informal purposes, e.g. proofreading school notices, gossiping about teachers. In turn, he recreated himself a more favourable English-learning environment.

The seemingly huge obstacle of speaking English was removed by the friendship-driven, peer-based learning, in which Carl learned more from his peer collaboratively and reciprocally, for example, more sophisticated writing skills (Ito et al., 2010). Forming a social circle with peers for practising English was an active exploration of the learning environment and a sign of learner autonomy (Palfreyman, 2011).

The peer-based learning of Elsa was different from Carl's. Elsa had to excel her speaking skills and performance in the language as she ranked almost the lowest in other subjects. Following her teacher's instruction of designing an out-of-class activity (an assignment to promote self-directed learning), Elsa designed a debate activity and invited her classmates to join it during recess. To Elsa, this teacher-initiated activity which aimed at exposing students to more self-directed mode of learning was her active exploration of learning opportunities as she perceived herself as a very passive learner who only followed instructions. She also shaped the activity for her own personalized need (i.e. speaking skill). She disclosed her internal thought:

I think, if I was still like that, I would be the same (passive) person for my whole life! [...] But when I was in higher forms, I observed from some of my classmates that their English might not be as fluent as mine but they could speak English in a confident way. Why was I so passive while others were very active! (Elsa, interview 1)

The peer-based learning of Elsa was a mixture of negotiation of present and future self-identity, instrumental motivation and peer affiliation. She wanted to be more active and started to make use of available resources, i.e. her classmates and the assignment, to help build her desired identity and gain acceptance in the class group. She exercised a great degree of control over her own learning in the teacher-initiated task, demonstrating learner autonomy.

3.3 Opportunities: Conforming to Peer Norm

Carl and Elsa actively redesigned their learning environment and took charge of their own activities while Ada joined a group-based English discussion initiated by her classmates. Abiding by their teachers' instruction, Ada and her classmates used English during recess:

At that time, during S4-5, *Lord of the Rings* was very popular and we loved acting out different characters during recess. We acted the fighting scene and our dialogues were in English as we watched the English version. (Ada, interview 1)

In Ada's case, the cultural product, i.e. the plots of TV programmes and movies, helped build language socialization, a sense of belonging to the group, and peer culture (Cheung, 2001; Duff, 2002; Ito et al., 2010). To prepare for the discussion, Ada deliberately watched English TV series/movies and monitored her language. In the process, she developed some sense of ownership of the teacher-directed activity. However, different from Carl and Elsa who participated in peer learning out of their individual needs, her primary goal of participation was to obtain peer recognition and group membership, as seen in her use of the collective pronoun "we":

My classmates were very energetic and open-minded. We did many strange things [...] We freely participated in the activities together [...] The oral practice was initiated by us. Everyone around me was so passionate to learn, and I also wanted to improve my English. (Ada, interview 1)

Thus, Ada did not develop a strong feeling of individual satisfaction from the peer-based learning. However, this type of peer-based practice was very common in local classrooms and Ada's participation demonstrated the impact of group influence and the related motivational force. A sense of community was reinforced in this collaborative, out-of-class activity, which promoted self-directed, autonomous practices (Beseghi, 2017). In a group, learners may unconsciously be affected by the power of some favourable leaders and follow the practice in a group (Dornyei, 2005). This might explain why Ada did not continue joining the activity in the next year as some leaders left the group. Although this peer-based activity was not yet a fully autonomous activity owned by Ada, it enriched her out-of-class experiences in her social context.

3.4 Discussion and Analysis

Although all case participants studied in English-medium secondary schools, they also shared the cultural and institutional constraints when using English among peers in non-required situations. The case participants struggled to overcome these obstacles and reshape their learning environment by realizing the instrumental drive, negotiating self-identities, and enlisting peer support, which demonstrated their learner autonomy (Palfreyman, 2011; Pavlenko, 2002; Toohey, 2007).

An active exploration of the use of English among peers is difficult. A legitimate reason is required to ease the strange and absurd feeling rooted in the mind of Cantonese-speakers. With this cultural constraint, the case participants made use of the widely-accepted, extrinsic, instrumental purpose (to achieve good grades in English examinations) as a reason for them to break the social sanctions and alter the unfavourable their English learning environment. In this aspect, the instrumental, pragmatic drive of learning the language may facilitate learner autonomy development, instead of hindering active learning, in the way of providing learners with reasons for opening up more learning opportunities in the social environment.

At this stage of education, learners' identities also played a role for the case participants to gain the right to speak English in informal occasions. The school was a major context for the young case participants to establish and negotiate their preferred identities (Lee & Sun, 2011; Lin, 2008). The two case participants, Elsa and Carl, realized their ownership of the linguistic capital (their proficiency in English) and negotiated an appropriate identity (e.g. proficient English learners) to assert the right and overcome the obstacles for them to speak English at school (Bourdieu, 1977; Lin, 2008; Tsui, 2007).

The two case participants, Elsa and Carl, opened and took up more learning opportunities with the help of their peers. They actively enlisted peers with similar goals and abilities as their learning resources and brought themselves personalized learning experiences through peer collaboration. Although Ada did not initiate the practise, she gained autonomous learning experiences and peer recognition through peer-based learning. In collaborative, peer-based learning, they practised the desired language skills (e.g. speaking) in a less formal situation and altered the learning environment with their companions, gaining more autonomous learning experiences individually and collaboratively and more control of their own processes (Beseghi, 2017; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Palfreyman, 2011).

Although the debate activity which Elsa designed was originally a teacher-directed task, she gained autonomous learning experiences through evaluating her learning goals and performances, coping with psychological obstacles, and finally opening up more opportunities to use English in her social context (Cervatiuc, 2009; Holec, 1981; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Palfreyman, 2011). This form of teacher-initiated activity, which allows students to design the form and skills of practices, enabled Elsa to review her needs and reshape her learning environment. This teacher-initiated participation offered students legitimate access to use English outside of class and an opportunity to gain independent

learning skills and sense of ownership (Reinders, 2011).

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

At senior forms, the case participants were able and willing to evaluate their learning weaknesses and actively took up peer-based learning opportunities to improve the language skill in need, which is an important aspect in learner autonomy (Littlewood, 1996; van Lier, 2007). Yet, at this age, their participation in out-of-class peer-based learning was quite limited and peripheral. Their sense of learner responsibility and ability was rather weak.

The teacher-initiated independent learning tasks taken up by Elsa might inspire local teachers on how to merge self-directed skills in formal, structured curriculum (Hafner & Miller, 2011). To equip students with more autonomous peer-based learning experiences and independent learning skills, local teachers can design an assignment which offers students freedom to choose the practising topics, skills, modes and learning peers. They can then practise their desired skills, learn from their peers collaboratively, and control their learning processes.

At this age, adolescents stress and value peer affiliation (Lee & Sun, 2011). As seen in the case of Ada, young learners want to cultivate a positive self-preferred identity with empowerment and pursue peer recognition in a desired social group (Lin, 2008). Teachers can strengthen group cohesion in the class and promote peer collaboration as regular, out-of-class extension of the formal classroom. Students are then given more chances and time to personalize their learning without the supervision and control of teacher (Jacobs & Tan, 2015). In the process, they may negotiate multiple-identities favourable to English learning.

In this digital age, the online social network affords English learners a non-threatening platform for practising the language (Hafner, Li, & Miller, 2015), in which learners can enjoy more chances of peer learning/mentoring and negotiate learner identities with minimal teacher supervision (Beseghi, 2017). Teachers can design out-of-class learning tasks with the use of social network to enable students to explore their own learning processes and roles in a peer group.

Although the case participants were proficient learners of English, they did not maximize the chance of practising English with their peers. Future studies should explore ways to encourage local learners to use English with their classmates and explore more peer collaboration opportunities in their social contexts.

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