

Promoting Effective Second Language Acquisition: Exploring the Benefits and Practical Implementation of Student-centered Learning in China

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Abstract: This paper explores how student-centered learning can benefit second language acquisition (SLA) in China. By drawing on the expertise of scholars in the field, the study explores how student autonomy, motivation, collaboration, and communication opportunities can positively influence general language learning outcomes. Additionally, this paper emphasizes the significance of adopting student-centered approaches to enhance language teaching in second language acquisition (SLA) specifically in the context of China's unique educational environment. By benefiting from SLA and language education scholars, practical suggestions for student-centered learning in Chinese language classrooms are also provided. Furthermore, the writer believes that by adopting a student-centered approach, language teachers in China can intentionally create an environment that helps students acquire language more effectively and improve their overall language proficiency. Student-centered approach not only contributes to better language skills but also advance a more engaging and interactive learning environment, students can develop not only enhanced language skills but also acquire valuable life skills through active participation in class.

Keywords: student-centered learning, second language acquisition, student autonomy, collaboration

1. Introduction

Education plays a vital role in the development of a nation, especially when it comes to language learning. All Schools in China have made English a requirement, raising the question of whether there are more efficient ways to learn or require a second language. Apart from natural intelligence and learning abilities, the choice of teaching methods becomes increasingly important for students in schools [1].

Student-centered learning, where students are expected to be individualized, emphasizes collaboration and communication through group work and project assignments, while the teacher's role shifts to the supporter. Students actively engage in their own learning process, taking ownership of their education and enhancing critical thinking skills [2].

Noam Chomsky has emphasized the importance of innate language acquisition abilities and the internal language acquisition device in the process of language learning, support the idea that students should play a central role in language acquisition [3]. Given this perspective, it is obvious that student-

centered learning approaches are highly suitable for language acquisition course. However, in the context of Chinese schools, there has been a tendency to prioritize teacher-centered learning, whereas the student engagement is limited. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the effectiveness of a student-centered learning approach for English language learning in China. It examines the context of English classrooms in China and seeks to understand why placing students at the center of the learning process gains better results. Additionally, the paper provides practical solutions that can be implemented in real classrooms to enhance language learning outcomes.

2. Literature Review

Since as early as 1995, Little has emphasized the importance of learner autonomy in second language acquisition. Little suggests that learners should take an active role in their own learning, while teachers provide support [4]. Additionally, Nunan has highlighted the connection between learner-centeredness and successful second language acquisition [5]. When learners have more control over their learning and engage in student-centered activities, their confidence and motivation improve, leading to better language acquisition outcomes. Furthermore, Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun have pointed out in their work that meaningful and interactive tasks can enhance the efficiency of language acquisition, emphasizing the significance of communication and collaboration in the learning process [6].

In China, several experiments focusing on the student-centered learning approach have been conducted. For example, Peng and Zhang implemented a study where they increased the amount of pair work in English class and granted students more freedom to engage in self-directed learning by using online platforms for one semester. Before and after the experiment, a B level English test was administered to assess the differences. The results showed an increase in the attendance rate for the test, which rose by 60%, and a 10% improvement in the passing rate [7]. In another experiment conducted by Chen, divided 90 Grade 8 students into two groups [8]. Group 1 followed the traditional teacher-centered learning approach, while group 2 adopted a student-centered learning approach. The aim was to enhance communication between teachers and students over the English course of one semester. Both sets of students completed a questionnaire with a total of 100 points, before and after the experiment. The questionnaire assessed their communication skills, study interest, study enthusiasm, and creativity. Group 1 scored 56 before the experiment and 61 after, while Group 2 scored 57 and 91 respectively. Both groups showed improvement, but the improvement was more apparent in group 2, which adopted the student-centered learning approach.

3. The Effectiveness of Student-Centered Learning in SLA

3.1. Motivation

When acquiring a second language, learners' motivation plays a significant role as it can influence learners' attitudes, effort, and persistence [9]. When learners are motivated, they will engage more actively and extensively in language learning activities, which will result in gaining exposure to the target language and improving the efficiency of SLA.

The experiment conducted by Peng and Zhang, which showed an apparent improvement in students' test attendance rate, suggests that student-centered learning can be a positive factor in improving students' motivation, resulting in better language acquisition [7].

3.2. Learner Autonomy

Autonomy in a language learning setting means allowing learners to take control of what they learn and how they learn [10]. In the author's view, instead of passively absorbing knowledge, being able

to question and think critically is more effective in a language learning course. This can be achieved by granting students more autonomy in the classroom. According to Little, Ridley and Ushioda, autonomous language learning has been proven to be highly successful compared to conventional learning processes [11]. The autonomous classroom in their study grants students more freedom to make hypotheses and experiment with language, resulted in better acquisition of grammatical patterns for the students.

Another benefit of increasing student autonomy is that it can provide students with opportunities to reflect and evaluate their learning progress, which related to the development of critical thinking skills. When students are given the freedom to set goals and adjust their learning strategies, they become more responsible and independent learners. This, in turn, improves their confidence and motivation, creating a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement in second language acquisition.

3.3. Collaboration and Communication

When it comes to the definition of acquiring a language, speaking and listening skills are as important as reading and writing skills. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, it is beneficial for language learners to be exposed to authentic language materials, such as conversations and real-life interactions [12]. However, in China, it is common to see a student who has high scores in English reading and writing but with limited ability to communicate effectively in English. The main reason for this is the teacher-centered approach used in Chinese emphasizes memorizing information rather than promoting active communication skills.

In Zhao, Lu, Jia, Su, Zhang's experiment, when students were given 10 to 20 minutes in English class to work in pairs and practice dialogues based on real-life situations, their English speaking and listening skills improve significantly [13]. In order to fully acquire a language, developing proficiency in all language skills is necessary. By shifting the centeredness from teacher to student in class can result in a better acquisition in language.

4. Practical Applications for Language Teachers in China

China - a country that has adopted teacher-centered learning for centuries, fully reversing this approach can be challenging. However, by making changes in the everyday teaching environment, it is possible to incorporate a mix of student-centered and teacher-centered learning approaches, which can be beneficial. Here are some practical applications suggested by the author.

4.1. Enhance Student's Motivation

Motivated students are more likely to engage actively in their language learning progress, which improves their language skills. To enhance student motivation, teachers in China should abandon the traditional concept of "score comes first" and focus on recognizing students' effort and providing needed help. Teachers can spare 1 to 2 hours per week to track students' learning progress, analyze their recent work to identify improvement and weaknesses. Based on the findings, teachers can schedule regular weekly or monthly individual feedback sessions to provide private feedback to students, give them the recognition they deserve, and guide them to fill the learning gaps.

Another practical solution is for teachers to break down a big, long-term goal into several smaller, achievable goals. By setting achievable goals, when achieved, students can experience a sense of accomplishment, which helps them to improve their motivation. For example, if the final goal for the semester is to improve students' English reading skill, the teacher can divide the semester into needed segments and set specific goals for each period.

Here is a general practical plan by dividing a semester into six weeks:

Week 1: Introduce extensive reading skills and extract unfamiliar vocabulary

Week 2: Teach students how to identify key words in a reading

Week 3: Introduce intensive reading skills

Week 4: Teach students how to paraphrase

Week 5: Practice paraphrasing each paragraph in a reading

Week 6: Time-limited reading practice

4.2. Improve Student Autonomy

The teacher-centered learning approach in China has limited student autonomy, which has resulted in a neglect of self-directed learning and critical thinking skills [14]. A practical approach in the particular situation is to encourage student-led activities in the classroom. For instance, after teaching a unit on friendship, teachers can assign students to do a brief presentation based on the content. By allowing students to choose specific topics within the theme, such as introducing their best friend or sharing an interesting story, they receive appropriate amount of freedom to work independently and creatively. This approach promotes autonomy, encourages critical thinking, and boost students' ability to express themselves effectively.

Moreover, another approach to enhance student autonomy is to ask students to complete self-assessments during their learning process. Teachers can schedule regular sessions after each unit for students to evaluate their progress. This approach encourages students to reflect on their ongoing learning journey, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and develop critical thinking skills. Through active participation in self-assessment, students can become more self-directed in their language development.

4.3. Increase the Proportion of Communicative Session in Class

Effective communication in target language has proven to be a strong input to acquire a language. Combining the student autonomy mentioned above, increasing the proportion of group work or pair work in class can help students gain valuable experience in interacting with others in the target language and enhance their active engagement. Taking the "friendship" unit as an example, teachers can introduce a small debate session based on the topic "friendship" and divide the class into pairs or groups. In this way, students can not only get to share their thoughts and ideas with each other in target language, but they also have the opportunity to practice speaking English with multiple classmates.

As important as student-to-student communication, the teacher-to-student communication can also be improved. When teaching language, teachers should avoid overusing closed-ended questions and use more open-ended "wh-" questions. For instance, instead of asking a yes/no question like "Do you have friends?", teachers can use an open-ended question like "What are your friends like?" This grants students the opportunity to express more about their ideas and encourages them to think and reflect more deeply.

5. Conclusions

Even though more and more scholars in China shed light on the effectiveness of student-centered learning in relation to second language acquisition, it's still quite a challenge to completely change the traditional learning approach. However, just like the example given by the author in this paper, the author believes if we break down big goals into smaller achievable ones, we can make improvements in the language learning environment in China. This paper recommends enhancing student motivation, improving student autonomy, and increasing the proportion of communicative activities in class to encourage active participation during the language learning process.

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