

The Globalization and Localization of “Learner-centered” Strategy from an International Horizon

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Abstract

In this article, “Learner-centered” teaching strategy is re-examined from both a macro and micro point to make up for the weaknesses of foreign languages teaching in China. When put in the background of globalization, how to localize it in a specific way suitable for the Chinese students based on their special culture psychology and study environment is of most importance

Keywords: Learner-centered, Culture psychology, Multi-languages training, Globalization, Localization

1. Introduction

Learner-centered teaching method is an important strategy adopted by second language teaching researchers and teachers, which encourages the student to make plans and chose what to learn according to their own interest. In this way, individual ability can be well motivated.

2. The connotation of Learner-centered teaching theory

The 1960’s witnessed the development of constructionism, which challenged the traditional binary opposition and teachers’ superior status in the teaching process. Constructionism is a new theory of learning rising from this background, which argues the close relationship between individual cognition and learning process, and thus puts forward the concept of “learner-centered”. “learner-centered” actually involves two elements: the language learner and the learning process (Nunan, 1995).

Learner-centered teaching theory emphasizes the core of learning process is the language learner, that they should be supplied with favorable learning environment. Thus the learners can be motivated and encouraged to practice self-regulated learning. The teacher should help the learners to tackle difficulties strategically and effectively, with the final aim to give the students the ability to learn.

Constructionists hold that the system of knowledge is not simply learned from other people, but constructed by individuals themselves. Language learners construct their knowledge structure based on their own motivations and needs. The construction follows the mode of “balance—unbalance—new balance” (Marion Williams & Robert L. Burden, 1997). At the same time, cognitive psychologist thinks that most learner are far from being passive in the learning process, that they actively face the learning tasks and try their best to use all sources available to help their own study. The representative of humanism Rogers (1983) stressed that human beings have the innate desire to learn, and when they realize that learning can improve themselves, they will practice self –regular learning. Bruner put forward “the principle of motivation”, which states the best motivation of learning is the interest in the teaching material. This requires the teacher to deal with the teaching material according to the student’s needs, stimulating strong cognitive drive.

3. Globalization in “learner-centered” Teaching Strategy

3.1 The Need of Globalized People

“Globalization” is the integration of worldwide politics, economies and cultures. This is an opportunity not to be missed by any nations. It is no doubt that globalization brings new requirement and challenge on education, and the inter-disciplinary talents of high quality are needed to meet the need of world market. Consequently, the reform of the teaching strategy, target, content and method is an unavoidable task faced by teachers and language researchers.

Although “education industry” is a controversial term, we can not deny that education follow the rule of “the

market economy” to some extent, that is, the majors of the student, the skills and knowledge to be taught should comply with the need of the job market and national economy. If we say the student is the customer, they have two requirements: individually, they want to become a high quality talent with specific skills and knowledge; socially, they should meet the needs of job market to survive in a changing society. This lends support to “learner-centered” teaching strategy, and at the same time, gives more pressure to the development of this strategy.

3.2 Innovation in Foreign Language Teaching

In the background of globalization, the teaching of foreign languages also faces opportunities and challenges, with the transformation from specialty to versatility.

Many schools have realized the needs of English majors. In the past 20 years, the curriculum of English majors has changed from pure language learning to various applied courses. The purpose of education has shifted from producing students with a single skill to students with various skills. All these reforms aim to produce students of sound English knowledge that can be applied to different industries. Courses like International Trade, Legal English and Tourist English were added into the curriculum to meet the need of globalization. But it is true that the number of electives is limited, and there is a lack of teachers who can conduct these courses in English. At the same time, the academic requirement of English majors cuts the time and energy spent on other subjects. So it is necessary to reconsider this problem and try to make a balance between intensive study and extensive study.

3.3 The Teaching of Other languages in the Middle School

Globalization has brought multiculturalism to every nation, which demand the mastering of languages other than English for students’ sustainable development. Statistics show that the motivation of learning a second language is far more than academic study and the need to work. So, the teaching of a second or a third foreign language should not be confined to college students and graduates. Middle school is the best time for language learning, so we need the policy and teachers to carry out this reform.

3.4 The Production of Study-oriented Students

Education primarily means the mastery of knowledge. But the improvement of learners’ ability is of the same importance. In other words, we should teach the students in a way that they can flexibly apply to their knowledge. Constructionists argue that learners will automatically bring their own experience to the learning process, which means they study actively rather than passively. But at the same time, they have their own limits to have a comprehensive and systematic mastery of what they have learned. To make up this weakness, teachers should design appropriate tasks, which function as the interface between the teacher and the learner. These tasks also facilitate learners to construct a frame of knowledge they learn. Another requirement is to give learners real freedom to explore by themselves, allowing them to argue with the teacher and express their own ideas.

Finally, the context in which the learning takes place also plays an important part. The emotional environment, in particular, is an essential part in language learning, which includes attitude, anxiety, self-esteem, etc. Emotion can influence intellectual activities and the response of the input information. To have an ideal emotional environment, teachers should consciously create a favorable situation to stimulate learners’ emotions. An ideal way is that teachers put their affection in their classes and use passionate ways to organize in-class activities.

4. The Need to Localize “Learner-Centered” Strategy in China

Every nation has its own cultural background and tradition, China is no exception. To make full use of Chinese students’ strong points and avoid their weaknesses is crucial for the successful application of “learner-centered” teaching strategy, and we should take local factors into consideration.

4.1 Problems existed

4.1.1 Negative effects of Chinese Traditional Culture

“Being modest and respecting teachers”; “Talk much, and err much”, these traditional cultural concepts have tremendous effect on Chinese learners. Confucianism stresses ethics, the idea of obedience and concession, which hinders the development of independent, cooperative learning. Take English learners as an example, they tend to be very quiet in class and more accustomed to the teacher’s lecturing, which reduces the number of opportunity that they can use the language. In addition, students develop their habitual behavior in language class. So the traditional culture is a challenge to the application of “learner-centered” teaching strategy and we should help students to overcome this weakness.

4.1.2 The Unauthentic Language Learning Environment

The artificial language learning environment hinders language learning in China. As we all know, language is the carrier of culture and the media to conduct social life, which makes the language vivid and full of vigor and vitality. Idiomatic expressions always come from native speakers and authentic teaching materials that are greatly in need in our language learning. The fact is that Chinese students, with an amazing large vocabulary, can pass tests like TOFEL, GRE, and IELTS, but they can not speak well because their vocabulary is unsystematic and they are not familiar with the cultural connotation. So, the authentic environment and authentic teaching materials are necessary for language learning.

4.1.3 The Pressure of the Large Student Body

The policy of admitting more college students also brings pressure to English teaching. As a compulsory course of the student, the size of English classes become bigger and bigger. In some schools, there are sixty to seventy students in one English class, even more than one hundred. Big classes are hard to control and students have less opportunity to use the language. At the same time, not all English teachers in China have profound knowledge and skills to express whatever they want to say. We should modify “learner-centered” teaching strategy so as to make it more suitable to Chinese student.

4.2 Ways to Tackle the Problems

4.2.1 Introducing Western Beliefs and Views

We should make full use of the positive traditional cultural concepts, such as independence and self-advancement, harmony, etc, at the same time we can introduce the western practice like “brainstorm” and “contribution”, that is, the teacher should encourage the students to actively participate in the discussion, to fully express their views and ideas, otherwise, “being silent” in class can be considered as “selfish behavior”. The introduction of this idea can break the cultural barrier of being afraid of “showing off” before other people. The student will be more active in class and thus teaching becomes more efficient.

4.2.2 Creating Favorable Environment for Language Use

Schools and society should provide the students with more opportunities to use their foreign language. The social environment of foreign language learning in our nation, especially English learning, can not compete with those in nations of which English is the official language or the second language. But we still can use English or other languages as much as possible in the advertisement, the on-line media, public signs and entertainment programs. In this way, the learners can “pick up” a foreign language in their daily life. We have seen some courses in universities and even middle schools are conducted in English, which can greatly facilitate English learning in China.

4.2.3 Making up the Disadvantage of Big Classes

We will cut the size the English classes in the long run. Under present conditions, we can resort to some flexible means to avoid the disadvantages. For example, we can carry out group work and debate, and make full use of the Internet, encouraging self-regulated learning. In addition to the teaching of rules and concepts, case study should be introduced to the teaching process. A network of systematic theories and concrete cases will give the student extensive and profound knowledge. At the same time, teachers should be aware of the importance of teaching the students the correct way to study.

4.2.4 Setting up Positive Learning Atmosphere

Chinese people pay much attention to relationship between persons. Even foreigners know the importance of “guanxi”. The harmonious relationship between teachers and students can facilitate the students’ acquisition of language. Krashen (1982) identifies three kinds of affective variables: motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. He argued that the learner’s emotional state or attitudes as an adjustable filter that freely passes or blocks input necessary to acquisition. According to the affective filter hypothesis, comprehensible input may not be utilized by second language acquires if there is a “mental block” that prevents them from fully profiting from it. So teachers should fully participate in the teaching process, reducing the negative effect of “filter” as much as possible by praising and encouraging students. Teachers should also help the students to have a sense of self-achievement and confidence, working out a favorable environment for both the teacher and the student.

4.2.5 Improving Teachers’ Quality

The government should give more opportunity for schools to exchange students and teachers. Talking to native speakers will not only improve the English level of Chinese learners, but also provide the context for them to understand native culture and society, which in turn, will help them to learn language better. In the background

of globalization, we should be aware of cultural differences and develop the ability to conduct cross-culture communication. The learning of a foreign language is no longer a simple study of language only, but a network of people, language, culture, and morality with the final goal of a world-wide civilized language.

5. Conclusion

Globalization is the trend in social development, which has introduced new ideas to Chinese English teaching and brought challenges. "learner-centered" is a teaching strategy adopted by many nations of present society, of which we should have a thorough understanding. The setting of goals of education, teaching strategy and method and the curriculum should be oriented to international standard and taken Chinese local conditions into consideration. Only in this way, we can take advantage of "learner-centered" strategy and produce talents needed by international market.

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