Integrating Learner Agency in EFL Writing Classrooms in China

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Abstract
Learner agency, as a specific aspect of learner autonomy, plays an important role in self-regulated learning. This paper focuses on classroom integration of learner agency, and designs a one-hour English writing lesson for Chinese English learners. Both the language aim and the learner autonomy aim are integrated in class by carrying out a series of classroom activities, including brainstorming, small group writing, peer review and oral presentation. By clarifying the principles and procedures of the designed lesson, this paper justifies that the promotion of learner agency is helpful for improving Chinese students’ English writing skills.

Key words: Learner agency; Learner autonomy; English writing; Lesson design

INTRODUCTION
The term ‘learner autonomy’ is a broad concept in language education without unified definition. The most widely quoted definition of learner autonomy is given by Holec (1981, p. 3) as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. Littlewood (1996) summarises two main components of learner autonomy: ability and willingness. Ability can be further divided into knowledge and skills, and willingness is divided into motivation and confidence. A successful autonomous learner ought to be equipped with all of these four components. In the 1990s, the concept of learner autonomy rapidly expanded from the self-directed language learning outside of the classroom to the context of mainstream classroom. The self-directed learning beyond the classroom focuses on external factors and involves learner independence as the major concern, while the autonomous learning inside the classroom concentrates on internal factors and is concerned with learner agency and self-control.

Learner agency refers to learners’ latent potential of self-directed engagement (Mercer, 2011). Martin (2004) defines agency as an individual’s capability of making choices and acting on these choices in ways that make differences in their lives. From the perspective of social psychology, Carson (2012) defines agency as the individual’s capacity for self-awareness and self-determination, including decision making, the ability to enact or resist changes, and take responsibility for actions. In the learning environment, learner agency refers to the degree of volition, proactiveness and self-initiation performed by individual learners. On the one hand, learners are self-propelled and initiate learning actively and proactively. On the other hand, learners could be reactive or even passive and refuse self-initiated learning. In the study of language learning within the classroom, Van Lier (2008) summarises three basic features of learner agency. The first is initiative, or self-regulation. The second is interdependency which mediates and is mediated by the sociocultural context. The third is an awareness of responsibility for learners’ actions vis-a-vis the environment. The centrality of learner agency in facilitating learner involvement is well studied and widely acknowledged. The significance of learner agency in language learning is increasingly recognized,
particularly in sociocultural theories, according to which learners are actively acquiring linguistic competence and non-linguistic outcomes instead of passively being taught (Brown, 2014). Therefore, to foster learner autonomy, especially learner agency in public classroom activities, is becoming an important goal and the teacher’s responsibility in language course design nowadays.

1. STUDY OBJECTIVE

In the past three or four decades, EFL writing instruction has been paid more and more attention. Many educationalists claim that the essential task of writing instructors is to help students develop their writing skills, explore ways of expressing the ideas, examine and refine their writing (Caulk, 1994).

This paper focuses on the integration and promotion of learner agency in EFL writing classrooms in Chinese schools. This paper aims to design a one-hour lesson for a class of Chinese English learners. The language aim for this EFL writing lesson is to improve learners’ writing skills and communicative competence in the context of online shopping communication. With the rapid development of the Internet and logistics, online shopping is becoming more and more popular around the world. When Chinese customers are doing online shopping in some overseas websites, they have to communicate with the online seller or custom service executive in English, which requires them to be proficient in transactional, or conveying information for specific purposes in an authentic and situated context of online shopping communication. That is to say, the teacher should guide students in learning to writing or “writing to communicate” (McLeod, 2001). The type of autonomous learners in this EFL writing classroom is described as a group of students with high independence, high self-control but low agency, which means these students are generally independent from teachers to make their learning decisions, and have the ability to manage and take charge of their own learning. Therefore, the warm-up stage of this lesson is crucial. The teacher needs to stimulate students’ interest in the writing topic. Crabbe (1993) indicates that classroom activities take place in the public domain of learning, while learners’ personal learning activities occur in the private domain of learning. In order to foster agency, the teacher needs to bridge the gap between tasks for the public domain and tasks for the private domain. In other words, classroom tasks should demonstrate something about private learning. To integrate agency into this EFL composition classroom, both the role of classroom discourse and classroom tasks should be considered according to Crabbe’s (1993) model.

In the process of welcoming and introducing the writing topic, the teacher should carefully think about what to say about the learning of writing and contain an orientation to the learning objectives for the writing topic. With the purpose of raising learners’ awareness of learning possibilities, the teacher should pay attention to classroom discourse about tasks, negotiate with students about aspects of learning for shared knowledge and finally enable students to transfer their learning between the public domain and the private domain. Therefore, the brainstorming is brought forward in the warm-up stage to negotiate the objectives of the EFL writing lesson. As part of the classroom negotiation process and a pre-writing classroom activity, brainstorming encourages students to brainstorm for everything they know about the writing topic of online shopping conversation, such as making request, seeking information, commenting and complaining while browsing, buying, selling, delivering and returning commodities in overseas shopping websites. Brainstorming leads students to share much of their prior knowledge in a supportive arena and helps to gather and elicit a quantity of inspirational ideas (Fredericks, 2010). Lin (2013) conducted a questionnaire survey to justify that the use of negotiated tasks rather than conventionally set tasks can better activate and promote learner agency. The data were collected from a routine EFL writing classroom of 30 first-year English majors in a Chinese university. The results showed that 93 percent of students preferred negotiated tasks because it led to better freedom, creativity and enthusiasm, aroused better interest and motivation, and resulted in better learning. Only two students

2. LESSON DESIGN

The procedure of this EFL writing lesson is composed of three 20-minute stages. The first is a motivational warm-up part, which includes welcoming, introducing the topic and brainstorming. The second part is a small group writing activity by using scenario cards. In the last part, peer review and oral presentation are carried out to gain peer feedback and promote group interaction.

2.1 The Warm-up Part of English Writing Lesson

For this group of Chinese students in the EFL writing classroom, they can make proper learning decisions independently from the teacher, manage and take charge of their own learning very well, but they lack agency in learning EFL writing skills proactively and do not initiate learning by themselves. In such circumstance, the warm-up stage of this lesson is crucial. The teacher needs to stimulate students’ interest in the writing topic. Crabbe (1993) indicates that classroom activities take place in the public domain of learning, while learners’ personal learning activities occur in the private domain of learning. In order to foster agency, the teacher needs to bridge the gap between tasks for the public domain and tasks for the private domain. In other words, classroom tasks should demonstrate something about private learning. To integrate agency into this EFL composition classroom, both the role of classroom discourse and classroom tasks should be considered according to Crabbe’s (1993) model.

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preferred assigned tasks as they were less challenging and less time-consuming. It seems that in this EFL writing lesson, brainstorming guides students to be actively propelled and highly motivated in negotiating the learning objectives and making decisions about the writing tasks, which in turn, allows the teacher to tap into the potential of learner agency and foster learner autonomy eventually.

2.2 Small Group Writing Activities

The second part is the core of this lesson. During this 20-minute period, small group writing based on scenario cards is designed to achieve both the language aim and learner autonomy aim. After the brainstorming negotiation, the learning objectives of the writing topic are set and the writing tasks are elicited and decided by learners themselves. These students are divided into several small groups. Each group is asked to design a scenario card, and then write a situational dialogue about online shopping according to the content and context of that scenario card. Small group writing, as a regular classroom activity, is fundamental to EFL/ESL writing in the composition classroom. Most EFL/ESL teachers use group writing activity to engage and motivate students in learning writing skills and to create an active and enjoyable learning environment. When students work in small groups, they are inclined to take on more complex and interesting writing tasks than an individual learner could manage alone. Furthermore, a well-designed group writing activity can incorporate many learning opportunities that an individual writing might not be able to comprise (Craig, 2012).

In this lesson, for students who are familiar with online shopping communication, they can be well suited to their increasing knowledge and their developing writing skills through small group working. Meanwhile, for those who are less experienced in online shopping conversation, small group writing can benefit them by setting up a more interesting and interactive learning environment, and provide them more learning opportunities in the composition classroom. This kind of cooperative learning activity bridges the information gap between different learners and encourages information sharing and communication. The use of scenario cards is also an effective writing activity to achieve both aims of language and learner autonomy. Donaldson (1978) indicates that the learner’s mind is capable of skilled performance in thoughts and language so long as the performance is embedded in the context of realistic situations. In this way, the exercise of scenario cards supports students to imagine an authentic situation where online shopping conversation occurs in real life. In addition, since scenario cards provide writing situations which contain realistic stimuli of the elements of writing skills inside and outside of the classroom (Scharton, 1989), students can proactively transfer their knowledge and experience of online shopping communication in their private domain to the public writing activity. Likewise, students can also initiatively apply their writing skills gained in the public domain into actual online shopping scenarios such as making request, seeking information, commenting and complaining about the products. It can be seen that using scenario cards to instruct EFL writing is beneficial to students. On the one hand, students are motivated and become aware of what to learn to meet specific needs in real environment. On the other hand, students improve their writing ability and communicative competence by means of scenario writing practice. As a whole, this lesson makes up a scenario card activity to link the gap between writing tasks for the public domain and those for the private domain.

2.3 Peer Review and Oral Presentation

The last part is a 20-minute evaluation session, two classroom activities including peer review and oral presentation are designed to get peer feedback and increase group interaction. Evaluation is important for learners to diagnose what difficulties they have in performing tasks and then to select appropriate strategies to meet these difficulties and the learning objectives (Crabbe, 1993). After writing a dialogue based on a specific online shopping scenario, students in a small group carry out peer review to gather feedback on their writing task. Peer review in which students critique and offer feedback on one another’s writing in a small group has captures the attention of EFL writing teachers in the last two decades. Cazden (1988) characterises peer review as enabling students to reconceptualise their ideas in light of their peers’ reactions and to establish a didactic relationship with their audience by giving and receiving feedback. Barnes (1976) supports increased opportunities for peer review because it allows students to engage in ‘exploratory talk’ as they try out and work through new ideas using unrehearsed language. Such exploratory talk among peers supports forms of learning which take place less readily in full class. Mangelsdorf (1989) advocates that peer interactions help L2 students communicate their ideas and can enhance the development of L2 learning in general. She also claims that peers’ feedback is important in second language acquisition, as L2 students must test out and revise their hypotheses about the L2 in meaningful contexts. Brief (1984) agrees that people internalise thought better when they converse, and he argues that writing is related to conversation as the way students talk with each other determines the way they will think and they way they will write. Therefore, researchers in EFL instructional settings support that the peer interactions that occur during peer reviews represent an important component of effective EFL writing instruction. Its potential to help students enhance audience’s awareness and improve writing skills through negotiating peer feedback is particularly appealing (Zhu, 2001). Liu and Carless (2006) point out that students develop their
writing skills through critical reflection, listening to and acting on feedback, as well as assessing and providing feedback. By these means students can learn not only from peer feedback, but also through meta-processes like reflecting on and justifying what they have written.

As a collaborative learning activity in this lesson, peer review raises learners’ awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in writing an online shopping dialogue, which fosters an awareness of the rhetorical structure of their own writing and facilitates the acquisition of evaluating skills (Hedgecock & Lefkowitz, 1992). After the implementation of peer review, each group is required to create and deliver a short oral presentation on their writing task together. In the EFL writing classroom, oral presentation is a prominent learning opportunity which usually comprises critical thinking, invention and drafting as early stages, and the approach of group presentation helps less able or inexperienced students, and experienced students to enjoy sharing the writing task (Craig, 2012). With the processing of connecting oral presentation to a finished piece of writing, students in small groups can benefit from three aspects. Firstly, students can practice their English pronunciation and gain fluency and accuracy for oral communication skills. Secondly, students are likely to improve their confidence and motivation in learning EFL writing skills since they work more extensively with the writing task. At last, students can find out what difficulties and gaps exist in completing the writing task and reflect on them.

CONCLUSION

This paper integrates learner agency in EFL writing classrooms in Chinese schools. In order to achieve the language aim of improving learners’ writing skills and communicative competence in online shopping communication, as well as the learner autonomy aim of promoting learner agency and encouraging students to have more volition and proactive engagement in EFL writing tasks, this paper designs a series of classroom activities, including brainstorming, small group writing by scenario cards, peer review and oral presentation in a one-hour EFL writing lesson about online shopping communication. After clarifying the principles and procedures of this designed lesson, this group of Chinese students are supposed to benefit from this EFL writing lesson.

REFERENCES